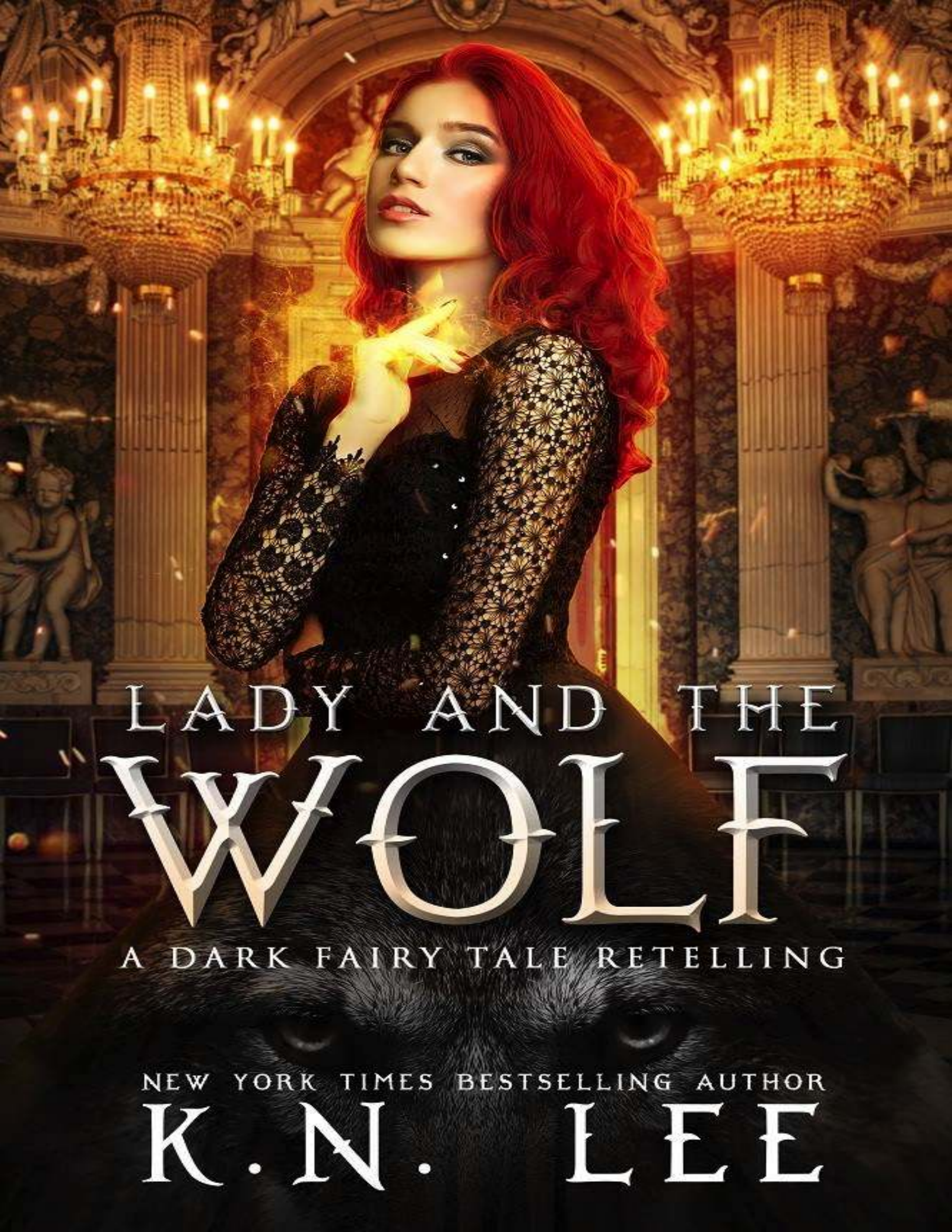
LADY AND THE
WOLF
A DARK FAIRY TALE RETELLING
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
K.N. LEE

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Dedicated to my grandmother, Patricia.

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FOREWORD

There were dark times in the era of the Baran clan. From the highlands of the old days when magic was deemed a myth, they rose to power after the global war that left most of the world desolate and eternally ruined by weapons of science and dark magic.

The first Baran to assert himself as king made it so that no one would ever challenge them. Those with magic were exiled to the other kingdoms, or executed.

Elastria would be a human land, free of the taint of supernatural beings.

Rulers by birthright, they stood unchallenged for centuries, their people too afraid to stand against the tyranny that nearly pitted Elastria in another world war with the remaining nine tribes. For a group of humans to rule so ruthlessly, and actually, stand against the supernatural beings of the other tribes, it was rumored that there was more to the Barans, that they were descendent from an ancient evil.

That all changed.

With a witch.

And a curse.

CHAPTER 1

IT ALL STARTED with a rumor.

"I heard there is a witch in this village."

Allyn didn't want to believe the truth her boyfriend spoke of. She'd felt the tension rising—the heavy energy in the air.

Such danger had threatened her since the night of her birth. But, if she hid her ability, she just might survive.

That's what she'd thought.

Byron had grabbed Allyn by the arm and made her face him. "Tell me. Are you a witch?"

"No," Allyn said, hoping her green eyes didn't reveal the truth.

She wasn't lying to him. Allyn wasn't a witch. She was something else. But try to tell that to the hunters searching for anyone with magical powers.

She'd kept her secret this long. Why reveal it now? Her people were a dying breed, and she was not ready to offer herself up as the next tabloid villain—the next public disgrace to be executed for all of Elastria to see.

"Don't lie to me. I know everything. You can trust me to protect you."

"Quiet," she'd said, glancing back at the wooden cottage where she'd been born and raised as a swift wind blew her black skirt up around her slender, white thighs. "My father is home and he will hear you."

She'd tried to break free from his grasp, surprised that he had learned her secret, but he held tightly, his brown eyes looking at her with love and not the fear or judgment she'd always expected.

"They will find you. And they will kill you." The stern look that filled his eyes had sent chills through her body as he held her hands out behind

her house in the woods. “Let me take care of you. Let’s leave and start a new life together,” he’d said.

That was last winter when she still thought he loved her more than any girl in the world—before he gambled all of her life savings away.

That was before the Wolf sniffed her out at the Samhain festival and she’d fled for her life. As Allyn cleaned her tiny apartment, dusting her bookshelves and sweeping the vinyl floor, she tried to forget the fear of being hunted. The same fear haunted her at night, warning her that the hunt was not over.

She remembered the first time she’d heard of a young woman being sniffed out by the Wolves and how that woman ended up publicly executed.

Exhausted from lack of sleep, Allyn wiped her brow and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the short bookcase. There were tears in her green eyes. Her wavy red hair was a stark contrast to her porcelain white skin splattered with freckles.

She squeezed her eyes shut and turned away from her image. She hated her face and the red hair that was so rare that she’d suffered constant teasing as a child. The only reason she didn’t dye it another color was because it reminded her of her mother, and how much she loved it.

A knock on the front door startled her. She froze, her face paling as she held her breath.

She didn’t move a muscle, afraid that one tiny squeak of the wooden floor would make the landlord aware of her presence. They were behind on their rent and any day now they would be forced out onto the streets.

“Allyn,” a muffled female voice called from the other side.

Relief washed over her when she realized that it was just Aude, her closest friend.

Allyn exhaled.

She crossed the room and unlocked several bolts on the door, then threw it open.

Aude’s big blue eyes widened. “Goodness gracious. You look like a freaking ghost!”

“Shush, Aude,” Allyn said, pulling her in by her hand. “I do not.” She shot a glance down the dark hallway outside before closing the door, pleased that the landlord was nowhere to be seen.

“Yeah, you do. Are you eating? Sleeping? Why haven’t I heard from you?” Aude asked. She was dressed in a black coat and jeans, her blonde hair tucked in a green beanie Allyn had knitted for her.

She took it off and rushed to warm herself in front of the meager fire. Allyn watched her, not sure how long the wood would last.

“I’m fine,” Allyn murmured.

“Whatever. Liar. I can see it all on your face that something is wrong. Have you left this awful apartment since I last saw you at the bakery?”

“I told you that I’m fine. I’ve just been staying inside and trying to stay warm.”

“Sure. I can’t blame you for not going outside. It's damn cold out there,” Aude said. “I think the Winter Winds might be coming early this year.”

Allyn chewed her bottom lip. She knew that to be a fact, but she couldn’t tell Aude that she could feel the change in the air. Though they’d been friends for the past nine months, she still wasn’t sure she could trust her with her darkest secrets.

“I need more firewood,” Allyn said, opening the closet to get her coat out. “I think we can make it to the shops and find some on sale.”

“I’m not so sure. They like to raise the prices for last minute shoppers. It might be too expensive.”

Allyn’s shoulders slumped. “I have to try. The power was cut off last week and I don’t know how I’ll survive without a fire in the middle of the winter.”

Aude took her hands. “Come stay with Khia and I. Our electricity is paid for the rest of the year. You can even sleep on our bed. We’ll make a comfy spot on the floor in the studio. It will be cozy.”

Chewing her lip, Allyn considered it. It would be nice to be somewhere warmer for a while, but she feared that as soon as she’d leave, Byron would return and wouldn’t know where she was. Even though he had hurt her numerous times, she still loved him.

“What do you say?”

Allyn shook her head and slipped on her coat. “But, what if Byron returns?”

“Come on, girl. Get over that scum. You know he’s probably sleeping in another woman’s bed right now…drunk or drugged to oblivion.”

That stung. Allyn's cheeks turned red as she fought to disbelieve Aude's accusations.

"And, you won't be stuck. One of the designers Khia works for has passes to leave during the winter curfew. For once, we get to go to parties and events that only the wealthy go to. Maybe you can meet a man…a real man. With money."

"Enough," she said, feeling like an idiot as the words escaped her lips. She knew that Aude was right, but what would she do without Byron? Allyn crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you coming with me to get firewood or not?"

Sighing, Aude nodded, putting her hat back on. "Let's go before it gets dark."

Outside, the bitter cold assaulted Allyn's face. She wrapped her red scarf across her mouth and around her head. The wind roared down the black streets, nearly knocking her over.

She braced herself as she stood on the bottom step of the front entrance, and pulled her navy wool coat tighter to her body as her hair blew around her face. She stepped onto the icy sidewalk, careful to avoid slipping.

Allyn looked down at her gloved hands, feeling heat radiate from her palms—heat that could warm her and Aude—but too afraid to chance it.

She had enough to worry about with an eviction notice stamped to the door to the flat she shared with Byron. With a witch hunt plaguing Elastria, she had to be especially careful.

"Let's hurry before the shop closes," she said, taking careful steps. Her black boots crunched salt that had been sprinkled along the roads and sidewalks of the inner city. No amount of salt could keep the onslaught of snow that would soon fall from the perpetually gray sky, though. Winter in the magical kingdom of Elastria was a time of darkness and frost.

"Good idea," Aude said, as they walked down Gilded Street toward the largest indoor market in the entire kingdom.

When Allyn and Aude reached the market, the crowds were already lined up outside the golden doors, prepared to buy everything they'd need to survive the cold winter. Allyn checked her brass pocket watch that hung from her waistcoat. Like the others, she'd waited until the last minute to do her final shopping. In just a few days, all shops and centers would close, and the city would enter a form of hibernation. If she hadn't had to

wait for her last check of the season to arrive, she might have been able to avoid the long lines.

She stood there at the back of the queue, anxious to get in and get out. “This is going to be fun,” she said with a sigh.

Aude looked around, scanning the two separate lines that filed into Grand Castile Plaza.

“I don’t see anyone that we know.” Her shoulders slumped. “So much for cutting line. Could have saved us some time.”

Allyn shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m in no rush. I’ve been stuck in the house all day, cleaning, and trying to keep my mind off things.” She put her hand to her forehead as all of her worries flooded her mind. With a sigh, she forced a smile. “I’m lucky to have such an amazing friend.”

Aude hugged her. “Of course. You’re literally the nicest person I know. You hold onto good people like you.”

With a smile, Allyn pulled away and looked down at the ground. Such compliments were rare. Within such a short time, they’d become close, closer than Allyn had been with anyone back home. Back home she didn’t have friends, just painful memories. There were good ones too, up until a point. She scratched a scar on her lower back through her clothes, wishing she could forget what caused it.

While the memories she fought to repress continued to haunt her most days, Allyn was determined to look forward.

“Everything is going to get better, sweetie,” Aude said, smoothing Allyn’s hair. “You have Khia and me and we both love you like a sister. There’s no way we will let anything happen to you.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

They stood under the red awning as fat snowflakes continued to cascade from the sky.

Allyn glanced back at her house, her heart dropping when she saw a black police van pull in front of her apartment building. She clutched Aude by the arm.

“Oh, no,” she whispered and Aude followed her gaze.

“What’s wrong?” Aude asked, narrowing her eyes as she looked from the police to Allyn.

Tears burned Allyn’s eyes as she watched another truck pull up behind the police. Four big men jumped out and followed the officers inside the

building. She knew what was happening and there was no longer any use shopping for supplies.

“They’ve come to put me out of my home and take my things.”

CHAPTER 2

KHIA OUTSTRETCHED HER arms to Allyn, her pretty heart-shaped face saddened by the news of Allyn's eviction.

Khia wiped her eyes of tears. She was almost a foot taller, with perfect brown skin, waist-length brown hair and hazel eyes that made her one of the most sought after models in the city. Khia's earning potential alone paid for their lavish apartment in the Heathrow area.

"Come here, honey," she said and wrapped her arms around Allyn. "It's going to get better. I promise. Aude and I are going to take good care of you. Don't you worry. We have enough to get all of us through the season."

Aude waited until they parted to kiss Khia on the lips. She took off her hat and coat and hung it up on the coat rack by the door before going directly to the fireplace to warm her hands.

Allyn remained by the door and sucked up tears. "You're too kind. Thank you," she said, hating herself for crying over Byron.

It was because of him that she was now homeless. If she hadn't given him her savings to start his band, she might have a good life. Just when she thought she had no more tears to shed, he ushered them forth once again. "I'm really looking forward to better times."

"Khia is right. It will get better, especially now that Byron is out of your life," Aude said. "When the season starts up again, you can actually save your money and not have him spend it all on stupid shit."

"I don't want to hear his name. I really don't," Allyn said, pulling away from Khia. She held out her arms. "Let's just stay warm and try to make the most of this season."

“Good. That’s the plan.”

Allyn scanned the studio apartment. A king-sized bed was at the far end beneath a large window, separated by a half wall just before the office space. Shelves lined the entire wall from the floor to a few inches below the ceiling.

The living space was the biggest portion of the studio, with black sofas and a red coffee table, a flat screen hanging on the wall, and a piano that Aude played on when they had parties.

It was a beautiful home, but Allyn hated charity. She sighed. At least she would be warm for the winter. With nowhere else to go, she’d have to do what was necessary to survive.

So, she shrugged off her waistcoat and put it on the coat rack.

“Make yourself at home. Like I said, Khia and I are happy to sleep out here and you can take our bed.”

“There is no way I’m taking your bed. I’m completely fine with the sofa. It looks comfy, anyway.”

“Okay,” Aude said. “I’ll make sure you’re comfortable. We have plenty of pillows and blankets.”

Allyn smiled. Was this what a sleepover was like? She’d always wanted to stay up late talking and laughing with girlfriends. Her childhood days were quieter, spent alone in her room or by the bank of the river with a bag of books and her favorite music.

“Thank you.”

“Would you like a drink?” Khia asked, heading over to their kitchen to the right of the front door. Her hips swayed as she walked as if the world was a runway.

Allyn nodded and took her hair from its ponytail so that it hung to her mid-back. “Yes. Whatever you have.”

Khia held up a clear bottle, her thinly arched eyebrow lifted. “How about a shot of Chronos?”

“Make it a double,” Allyn replied, as she crossed the room to the window that stretched from floor to ceiling and looked out onto the city.

“Babe,” Aude said. “How do you feel about me dyeing my hair red?”

“Do whatever you want. I hear it’s going to be the hottest trend in the fall.”

Allyn knew nothing of fashion or trends. She couldn’t afford to follow such things. Her heart soared with books and art, two things that Byron

never understood. Dating a musician whose idea of a fun night was drinking and throwing darts or playing video games, Allyn had lost sight of what she truly wanted. She was supposed to be a teacher, not a waitress. Sometimes she wished she hadn't fallen for Byron when his band came through her small town.

From that high up, she could see the entire city, all the way to the Briar Woods that separated Elastria from New Prussia, the next kingdom over. The sun was setting, and the city was blooming with color and light that were enchanting, hypnotizing Allyn as she imagined what life would have been like if she'd never met Byron.

She sighed, pressing her forehead against the cool glass.

"Here you go, love," Khia said, tapping Allyn on the shoulder. Aude stood beside her, two shots in her hands.

Allyn took her shot glass and together, they prepared to toast.

"Cheers to a new beginning," Aude said.

"And saying goodbye to trifling men," Khia added.

Forcing a smile, Allyn nodded. "Cheers to that."

They tapped their glasses together and drank down the potent liquor that burned Allyn's throat.

She winced at how strong it was.

Khia looked up from her phone. "You guys aren't going to believe this," she said, a grin spreading across her face.

"What is it?" Aude asked.

Khia jumped up and down, her bangs bouncing. "I was approved for a curfew pass! I can bring three guests with me to the Pre-Season Party."

She ran toward their bedroom area and threw open the wardrobe.

"What does that mean?" Allyn asked as Aude tossed several shiny, glittering dresses onto their king-sized bed. "Won't everything be closed?"

"No, girl. We will get picked up in half an hour and taken to the secret location where the party is being held."

Allyn sat down on the sofa. She knew they were looking at her, but she intentionally averted her eyes and turned on their TV. She wasn't going anywhere, least of all a party where she'd be surrounded by strangers. "You guys have fun. It has been a stressful day. I'm not going."

"Like hell you're not. You get your skinny butt off the couch and get in here. We are dressing up and ending the season with a bang."

With a groan, Allyn turned to her. “I can’t. I don’t really feel like being around a lot of people.”

Aude approached and knelt down before her. “Sweetheart, that’s why you need to come with us. I know that Khia and I are fun and all, but after tonight we will all be stuck indoors for six weeks. Even if you don’t feel like it, you need to take advantage of this opportunity. Who knows what will happen? You might actually thank us for persuading you.”

When Aude gave her a smile that highlighted her dimples, she knew there was no more use resisting. So, she stood, and with a sigh, she nodded.

“Fine. But, you’re going to have to let me wear one of your dresses.”

Aude clapped her hands and then nudged her along to the bedroom. “I have the perfect one for you,” she said, her grin widening. “Someone might find a new man tonight.”

CHAPTER 3

CONALL BARAN STOOD on the balcony, looking out into the dark forest as white snow fell from the sky.

He gripped the slick ice-covered railing with his bare hands. His jaw clenched as Hannah stormed into his private chambers behind him, her high heels clicking against the marble floors so loudly that he almost cringed at how much the sound was intensified by his ultra-sensitive ears.

"I fucking hate you," she said from behind him.

The voice he'd once thought was husky and seductive now grated on his nerves.

"Conall! I didn't waste nearly a year of my life to be thrown out on the streets. After all that I've put up with you and your mood swings!"

If he looked at her face he might actually pity her.

Hannah Morse didn't deserve his pity. If the streets were her only option after betraying him, then that's where she belonged.

"You break up with me and then throw a party at the Digital Underground. What is wrong with you? Hey," she yelled. "I am talking to you."

When Conall turned to her with a glare, she took two steps back, her face paling.

"Get your things, and leave," he said. "I don't want to have to get the guards to escort you out."

She swallowed and tossed her voluminous blonde hair.

"I don't believe you."

He folded his hands before his black suit and stepped forward through the open glass doors of his balcony. His room was impeccably clean and tidy. Everything was polished and dusted daily. Stacks of shirts were folded and stored in his wardrobe. Books were lined up in alphabetical order on the shelves in his office. His face reddened. Seeing her clothing sprawled on the floor made his skin crawl.

“You don’t have to believe. The curse is real, and if you don’t get out of my home, I will show you just how real it is.”

Her bottom lip trembled. “Conall, darling. You know that I didn’t mean those things that they put in the paper. I love you.”

He paused and squeezed his eyes shut.

Love? Is she delusional?

Hannah didn’t know what that word meant. During their time together she’d been feeding stories to the tabloids and imperial papers to further her career. He should have looked deeper into her past, but even that wouldn’t have revealed her true intentions—that she just wanted a story.

A buzzing sound came from his watch and he glanced down at it. It was Kyle, his oldest cousin. His shoulders slumped and he answered the call by clicking the button on the side. He walked away from Hannah, the device implanted within his ear clicking on with the call.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Are you alone? Is Lennox around?”

Conall glanced at Hannah who still stood there, her almond-shaped blue eyes following him from the center of his bedroom to the study that waited just through the white stone archway.

“What do you need, Kyle? You can speak freely,” he said. “Lennox isn’t here.”

“We found her.”

Conall froze. “What?”

“You heard me right.”

It can’t be. The one witch Lennox hadn’t been able to capture.

When Conall had heard the story, he’d been amazed. A young woman had cast an impenetrable barrier and gotten away, something no other witch had been able to do. It was as if her powers were different from the simple spells they were used to. Stronger.

“You’re joking,” Conall said.

“Have I ever been the kind of person to tell jokes?”

Good point.

“You found the witch?”

“Not just any witch. We found the one that Lennox told your father about. She sounds incredible. None of the others were able to do the things she did that night in the woods. And no one escapes Lennox.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“What do think we should do?”

“You tell me. Personally, I think we should keep her around. With the other kingdoms at our throats, it won’t hurt to have someone as powerful as her on our side.”

“I agree with you. Whatever you do, don’t let Lennox find out. He will want her dead, and if we want to use her, it’s best that we keep this a secret.”

“I will try my best,” Conall said, and then ended the call.

Conall sighed and returned to Hannah, who now sat on the edge of his bed, her dress on the floor. For a moment, his eyes widened as he looked at her sitting there, naked, her perky breasts pointed toward him. Once, he had cared for her, and if he hadn’t found out about her leaking secrets about him to the press, he would have joined her on the bed and made love to her. They’d fought before, but this time there was no coming back.

“Won’t you come to bed, baby?” She pat the mattress next to her.

“Hannah,” he said, crossing the room to pick her dress off the floor. He shoved it into her arms, his fury boiling forth. The veins in his neck bulged as he restrained himself from lashing out on her. “Get out.”

She didn’t ask any questions. She hopped from the bed and ran from his room. Before she turned the corner, she shot a look over her shoulder that made his blood run cold.

“You’re mad, Conall. And I feel sorry for you.”

With that, she disappeared.

Conall rubbed his face. Those were the most truthful words she’d ever said to him, and the way she said it—with that sad look on her face—would haunt him. He was mad, and there was no cure for his affliction.

With a sigh, Conall stared at the door she’d left out of. He almost started to love her. *Almost*. But, not even her attempt to seduce him would erase the distrust for her. You betray Conall once, you never get another chance.

Still, even when he started to suspect her secret dealings, he kept her around. Being with a liar was better than being alone.

The ache in his heart frightened him. There was no bringing her back now.

“She was never the right one for you,” a soft female voice called from the darkness. Like the wind, it seemed to surround him. “She would have never broken the curse.”

“I’m beginning to think that the right woman for me doesn’t exist.”

“If you start thinking like that, the curse will never be broken.”

Conall shrugged. “Well, perhaps it’s time I start facing reality,” he said, and headed out the door for what he hoped would be a few hours of diversion.

CHAPTER 4

SNOW FELL LIKE little crystals from the sky, making the streets glitter as a party bus picked them up.

It was odd seeing the streets and sidewalks free of crowds of people and the usual vendors that would stay out all day selling street food to passersby. The shops were closed for the season, and all transport was shut down.

But, for once, Allyn was free to be out in the city. They got into the sleek, black bus and she was surprised to see seats that faced each other on either side. The seats were filled with other party goers. Girls—more like models—were dressed in tight, short dresses with way too much skin than Allyn was comfortable showing.

As she followed Aude and Khia to the back where there were exactly four seats left, she averted her eyes, already self-conscious for being in the sparkling gold dress Aude had let her wear. It was a little shorter than she would have liked, with a plunging neckline that Khia said made her breasts look great. At least it covered the scars on her back. She'd been careful to get dressed in the bathroom, not ready to explain the gruesome scars that tainted her white flesh.

That comment alone made her blush and wish she'd have worn a jacket. Thankfully the bus was warm and they would be dropped off underground where the cold wouldn't give all of the young partygoers a chill.

No one wanted to spend the entire season battling the flu.

Once they sat down, a tall blond woman stood and smiled at everyone. "Next stop, The Digital Underground!"

Everyone cheered. There was a cooled barrel in the center of the bus, in between poles that Allyn figured was there in case someone had the urge to strip in the middle of the bus.

This was not her typical scene, but Aude was right. Maybe she should experience new things.

Inside the barrel were cans of cold beer. Once the bus started moving again, they were passed cans of amber ale.

Khia and Aude popped their cans open and Allyn followed their lead. “All right girls. Let’s get drunk, dance our asses off, and party like it’s the end of the season.”

“It is,” Aude said with a laugh.

“That’s right, and no one has to drive home. So, *yeah*. Let’s do this!”

Allyn couldn’t help laughing with them and they all drank from their cans. The cold liquid added to the buzz Allyn already had from the double shot of Chronos.

As the music pumped in the bus and people started dancing, she found herself actually getting excited for what she would see at the Digital Underground. She’d heard of the super exclusive club but had never imagined actually going there. Only the wealthy and famous were allowed, with exceptions for the most attractive girls that got in for their looks alone.

Instead of dancing with her friends, she pressed her body to the far window and looked out at the city that now looked abandoned. It had an eerie beauty about it, with the dark empty streets covered with white snow that was being scraped away by a shovel attached to the front of the bus. But the buildings, with their lights and glass siding, made Central Elastria look like a fairytale land of the future.

As she tuned out the music, she realized that’s exactly what it was.

They arrived at the Digital Underground much faster than she’d expected, but it made sense since there was virtually no traffic the entire drive.

The bus drove into a tunnel lit bright with yellow lights. When it parked in the parking garage, everyone lined up, ready to get out and head to the entrance of the club. Allyn was at the end of the line as they filled out and into the parking garage. A purple carpet led to the front door guarded by four giant men with black shirts that clung to their large muscles.

Khia showed her invitation and they were all allowed inside. Once they stepped through the heavy gold encrusted doors that made it look like they were entering a temple instead of a club, the entire atmosphere changed.

Allyn audibly gasped as they entered the magical world of the Digital Underground. She held onto Khia's hand, not wanting to get left behind as darkness smothered them, only highlighted by iridescent red and purple lights that streamed along the walls, illuminating ancient symbols of the old age when the fae were as much a part of Elastria as humans.

Her skin tingled. This felt more like home than anywhere she'd ever been.

It delighted and scared her, for her palms began to itch with the urge to cast.

As they walked through the long tunnel of glowing symbols, the music grew louder and louder until it was at full volume at the end that opened up to a circular balcony that looked down at the glass dance floor packed with people.

Allyn's mouth parted as she looked in awe at everything, her eyes following four girls dressed in nothing, but covered in neon paint that made it look like they were of the ancient fae tribes. They grabbed onto colored sashes that carried them up into the sky. She stood there, her hands clasped around the golden railing of the balcony as they reached the top of the ceiling, wrapped the bodies into the sashes and began to dance.

"Wow," she said.

Aude and Khia stood on either side of her. "I know. The aerial dancers here are some of the best I've seen."

"I know. The dances at Mez have nothing on these girls," Khia added.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they actually had fae blood."

"I doubt it. There's no way the king would allow it."

"How would he know?" Aude asked, challenging her playfully.

Khia shrugged with a laugh. "Good question." She looked down at the bottom floor. "Shots! Let's go to the bar."

Allyn groaned, already feeling like she had too much as Khia took her by the hand and pulled her along. They walked along the balcony until they reached a set of metal stairs that led them down to the dance floor and bar areas. All of the flashing lights were a bit disorienting but in addition to the music it made her adrenaline pump.

Before she knew it, she found herself nodding her head to the music. They stood at the glass bar, where the attractive male and female bartender showed off their bar skills, doing tricks with the alcohol and glasses.

As they drank their second shot of the night, Allyn's eyes wandered around the club and its many sights. She set her shot glass down and froze when her eyes went to the VIP section. Something odd happened. Her ears seemed to grow hot and quiet as she peered past the open curtain and into the darkness. Someone watched her, a man, in the darkness. She held her breath, realizing that there was a silver glow to his eyes.

Despite the entire room going silent, she could hear her own heartbeat and the world seemed to slow.

She swallowed, clutching the bar. *No,* she thought. *Not now*. If she didn't gain control of her mind, she feared what would happen—what would be revealed. The Digital Underground was the last place she wanted her secret to be seen.

When the mysterious man stood and spoke to one of the VIP guards, she feared that he had seen something. Did her eyes glow as well, flicker with light? Did she miss a shard of red power escaping her fingertips?

Worried, she stepped away from the bar and began to run when someone stepped in front of her. A young man with light brown skin and closely cut hair smiled at her. He was of medium height and wore a black suit. Something about him told her that he wasn't one of the clubbers.

"Hello," he said, in a posh northern accent. "I'm Edan. And you are?"

Allyn swallowed, confused by the sudden question. Was he hitting on her? She could never be entirely sure when it came to men.

"Allyn."

"Lovely name," Edan said, smiling, his white teeth glowing in the neon lights. "I'd like to invite you and your friends to the VIP lounge."

"Sure," Aude said pulling Khia away from the crowded bar. "We'd be happy to go to VIP. Do you have food back there?"

"Of course. You can have whatever you'd like," he said, his eyes scanning over the both of them and how Aude's arm was around Khia's waist. "This way."

Allyn shook her head as he turned his back. "No," she whispered to Aude. "I don't want to go. I don't feel right about it."

"Hey," Khia said. "You promised us that you would try to have fun. Come on. Everyone knows that VIP is where the real fun is."

“Who wants to party out here with all of the peasants?” Aude asked, motioning to the hundreds of people on the dance floor and filling the club.

Cautious, Allyn followed behind them, her eyes on the darkness inside the VIP section. Something warned her—screamed at her to turn around and escape while she could. When she glanced behind her, there was a guard with a device on his ear. He followed as if to keep her in line.

Her heart really started to race then. She rubbed her sweaty palms onto the bottom of her dress and tried to keep the terrified look off of her face.

Once she took the steps up to the VIP section, something else replaced her fear.

Wonder.

Inside the curtains was more ancient writing etched into the dark walls. Glowing lights cast a dim glow on the different sections of the long hallway. There were several square-shaped sofas around tables with well-dressed upperclassmen and women seated around them.

The people inside were different—calmer and more refined than the hyper clubbers outside in the general population. Even though they sat in seats that encircled glass tables piled high with champagne and liquor, they seemed to be in a different state of mind.

Drugs, maybe?

She averted her eyes from staring at the men and women that made out right there in public. An older gentleman in a suit had his hands up a skinny blonde’s blouse as she straddled him.

Allyn swallowed, definitely not liking what she saw, and what she guessed was expected of her and her friends.

She tried to relax as her heels tapped along the black floor, but when they stopped at the back of the section her eyes locked with the man in the far corner.

He looked vaguely familiar, but there was something about him that made her face flush, her heart stop, and her eyes widen. Never had she seen eyes so icy blue. Even in the dark, they stood out to her. His hair was dark, and short, unlike the long styles the men were wearing in town.

“Have a seat, ladies,” Edan said. “I’ll have the private waitress tend to you.”

Still frozen in place, Allyn had to force her feet to move forward. When he looked away, she was broken from her trance and was free to

sit…as far away from him as she could.

Something isn't right. Leave, Allyn. She fought with herself until she found her hesitance replaced with intrigue. The man in the fancy black suit with the red tie was mysterious. There was something about him that pulled her closer.

When he stood, Allyn held her breath. He was tall—at least six-foot-five, with a square jaw and a clean-shaven face.

The shots from earlier warmed her from the inside out at that point, and as she looked up at him, she began to relax. Looking into his eyes did that to her. In his gaze, she was safe.

"Good evening." He held a hand out to her. "Join me for a walk," he said, the same accent Edan spoke with lacing his words with an intoxicating flair.

It wasn't a question, and she could listen to him talk all day.

Confused by her sudden desire to do what he said, she accepted his hand.

"Where are you going?" Aude asked, sitting up as she watched Allyn come to her feet and follow the stranger.

Allyn glanced back and shook her head. "I don't know."

With a charming smile, the stranger turned to them. "You don't mind if I steal her for a moment, do you?"

Allyn noticed how the color in their faces drained as they got their first real look at his face. Did they see what she did? A man that was too handsome to be real?

"Of course, your highness," Aude said, lowering her head.

"Forgive us," Khia said, her head lowered as well.

Your highness?

Realization hit Allyn like a cold bucket of water was splashed onto her face.

That's why he looked familiar.

She tensed.

Holding her hand was Conall Baran, the crown prince of the Baran clan.

A Wolf.

CHAPTER 5

THE HAIRS ON Allyn's exposed arms stood on end as she walked behind Prince Conall Baran from the VIP lounge.

He didn't glance back at her as they walked down the long hallway lit with neon lights that trailed along the grooves of the floor. The sound of the music faded farther and farther away as they approached the far door that led to the elevator.

Once they reached the elevator, Conall pressed the button and it opened. They stepped inside and she stood far from him, watching him select the eightieth floor at the very top of the building. Why he chose to take her far away from her friends she was uncertain of. But, as they rode the elevator to the top, she could feel sparks of electricity between their bodies.

It was odd. She'd never felt such magic just by standing beside a man. Her brows furrowed as she glanced at him. The urge to touch his face was almost unbearable.

Did he have magic as well?

When he met her gaze, she looked away, fixing her eyes on the glowing buttons on the elevator panel.

"What is your name?"

"Allyn."

"Allyn, what?"

"Allyn Carmody."

"Oh, you have Irish ancestry. Nice."

"Thank you. There aren't many of us in Central Elastria."

“Don’t worry. We are all blended. There aren’t many Scots outside of my clan anymore either.”

The world was a mixture since the wars of the old days. The old countries and kingdoms were no more, but some still liked to hold on to their ancestor’s heritage. Allyn knew she was of Irish ancestry. She just wished she knew a bit more than that. Above all, she yearned for more information about where her power came from. It was like a secret curse that followed her around wherever she went, promising to ruining everything she ever built.

“You’re the first shy girl I’ve met at this club,” he said. “You seem more like the stay at home and read type.”

His observation was uncanny. It caught her off guard just how accurate he was. “You’re right. I would have rather stayed at home.”

He lifted a brow just as the elevator doors slid open. “But then we might not have ever met.”

She swallowed as he reached for her hand and led her outside the elevator to another long hallway. She wanted desperately to tell him that they had met before, once when they were children.

“This is true,” Allyn said, walking hand-in-hand beside one of her greatest enemies. She knew this to be a fact, she just wasn’t sure how much he knew. “Where are you taking me?”

“I want to show you something. You see, I’m like you. I’d rather stay at home with a book. But, a prince must show his face once in a while. I saw that look in your eyes like you were uncomfortable amidst the wild partygoers, and I asked my assistant to bring you to me.”

“Oh,” Allyn said, taken aback by his candid response. Then again, there was a tiny thought that he would say anything to get her to his bed. She hoped he was honest. Being taken away from the party wasn’t the worst thing that could happen. She never wanted to be there anyway. “Thank you.”

“No problem. I know of a quiet place. I think you’ll like it.”

The door ahead looked to lead outside.

Unsure of what to expect, Allyn began to dread going outside, knowing that the biting cold would chill her bones. She held her breath with anticipation as Conall opened the door and held it for her.

“Come now,” he said, a mischievous glint in his blue eyes. “I promise I won’t bite.”

“Good one,” Allyn said under her breath, and he chuckled.

Conall’s laugh was nice and disarming. Despite all of the warnings within, he made her feel comfortable.

Instead of being met with cold, the temperature never changed as Allyn stepped into an indoor garden lounge. Her eyes widened at the glass room that had the best view of Elastria that she had ever seen.

Mouth open, she spun around as she looked at the stars above, and the snow that fell like rain. There was a bar in the middle of the empty room, two female bartenders ready to serve.

“Is this another lounge?” Her eyes went to the flowers that lined the circular path that surrounded the bar.

“It is. Beautiful,” Conall said. “Isn’t it?”

There were tables and leather sofas lining the walls, except for one area where the people could step out onto the balcony. It was closed at that moment, but Allyn imagined how wonderful it must be during the warmer seasons.

Nodding her head, Allyn stood before him. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at his face. “Why did you *really* bring me up here? We could have talked in the VIP lounge, with my friends.”

He took a step forward, making her uneasy by his proximity to her body. “I like beautiful things,” he whispered, his breath warming her neck. “And you are the most beautiful woman I’ve seen in a long time.”

“So,” Allyn said, turning to Conall. “You really think I’m beautiful?”

He grinned, his brows furrowing as he looked down at her. “What kind of question is that? Of course. Don’t you?”

Allyn’s eyes widened. No one had ever asked her that before. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “Only one person has ever told me that. Before you, that is.”

“That is a shame. You deserve to hear those words every day.”

Wow. He is good. Allyn twirled a ringlet of hair as she looked up at him. *Too good.*

“Who was the other person?”

“My boyfriend,” she said and cringed at her mistake. She sighed and pushed her hair from her face, tucking wild strands behind her ear. “My *ex*-boyfriend. He left me a few days ago.”

Conall leaned in close. “Bloody fool. His loss.”

“I’m sure he thinks otherwise. He has grand thoughts of being a rock star. He doesn’t need a girl like me holding him back.”

“A girl like you? I don’t think you give yourself enough credit. I’ve known you for less than an hour and I can tell you deserve better.”

“Do I deserve a prince?” she asked, batting her eyelashes, a demure smile on her lips. She was surprised by her confidence, but pleased by his reaction.

He gave her an amused look and they laughed. “That remains to be seen.”

She bit her bottom lip and inhaled. Never had the presence of a man stirred her desire so easily. She stepped away and turned her back to him.

“Would you like a drink?”

Allyn nodded. “Sure. I’ll have what you have.”

He walked over to the bar and a tiny bud of hope was buried within her heart that maybe he wasn’t trying to trick her. Maybe he was just as attracted to her as she was to him.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Such thoughts were dangerous. It was too soon. Her heart was still broken by Byron.

Byron—the man who promised her the world and left her with nothing.

She opened her eyes and scowled at the glass. Why should she waste another minute thinking about him? He wasn’t thinking of her. If he had, she wouldn’t be homeless right now.

“We are in the same boat,” Conall said. His hands lifted her hair. “I’m newly single.”

Allyn watched him touch her hair, only wanting him to come closer. “I know,” she said. “I may be new to Central Elastria, but I can read the papers, and the entire kingdom knows about you.”

He stepped to her, his chest an inch from her face. She looked up at him, noting how his face had turned serious, his smile fading, his eyes narrowed. She also noted how alluring he smelled.

He lowered his voice. “What do you think you know about me?”

Allyn swallowed, once again intoxicated by his presence alone. His cologne was mixed with the smell of evergreen, as though he’d hiked through the woods before coming to the Digital Underground.

Her face paled when she realized just how true that could have been. He was a Wolf after all.

“Well,” she began, licking her lips, surprised by how boldly she was speaking to the prince. “Everyone knows about the actress you were dating. And how you broke up with her when she told you she was pregnant.”

Conall laughed. “Do people actually believe those stories?”

Shrugging, she looked up at him and lowered her voice. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t believe everything that you hear,” he said. “I broke up with her for selling stories such as the one you read in the papers. Like you said, she was an actress. A good one.”

Allyn hated to see him frown. She wished she hadn’t made that accusation, but then she might not have seen his candid, vulnerable side.

“I almost believed she was genuine.”

“I’m sorry,” Allyn said. She found herself believing everything he said to her. It was difficult not to. She’d learned the difference between truths and lies in a person’s eyes.

Conall didn’t speak. He tilted her chin with the tips of his fingers and leaned down to kiss her.

Though surprised by his sudden kiss, she didn’t resist. Her body awakened the instant his lips touched hers. Allyn’s eyes fluttered closed as Conall turned her to the window and pressed her body to the glass. With his body pressed against hers, she surrendered to his kiss. He took her bottom lip between his teeth and sucked it, as his hands cupped her face.

Conall tasted sweet, like honey. He slid his tongue against hers, devouring her mouth. She didn’t care that they weren’t alone. Her focus was on the handsome man before her, and how she could get more of his affection.

When he pulled away and took her by the hand, Allyn was dizzy. Breathless.

Her chest heaved as she opened her eyes and looked at him. Not even Byron’s kisses left her so disoriented and yearning for more. Butterflies filled her belly as she realized that this could be the beginning of something incredible.

“Listen,” he said, his forehead pressed to hers as he held onto her waist. “I leave tomorrow, but I’d like to spend these last few hours with you. What do you think?”

Allyn’s eyes were fixed on his lips. A night with a handsome prince? More like a night to make him fall and make her a princess. She knew that she was silly to even think such a thing was possible. Still, she was up for the challenge. She didn’t want to be a princess. She just wanted someone to be good to her.

“Sure. I don’t have anything else to do.”

“Good,” he said and kissed her again. He stroked the small of her back and she melted into his chest.

Delicious little sparks.

“How about we get out of here? I have a loft on the top floor.”

Allyn didn’t hesitate, despite her fears that he just wanted to sleep with her. Aude and Khia were right. She needed to get over Byron. Perhaps a night with a prince was just what she really needed.

“Yes.”

As those words fell from her lips she began to wonder who the enchantress was in this scenario…because she was sure Conall had *her* under a spell.

CHAPTER 6

PRINCE CONALL'S LOFT was located on the top of the skyscraper.

The entire top floor belonged to him, and when they walked inside, Allyn was taken aback by the amount of room. Inside, a fire burned in the center of the living room in a white, stone fireplace. A loft bedroom with a glass half-wall overlooked the lavish living space with plush sofas, glass tables, and a full kitchen.

"How long are you staying here?" Allyn asked. A family of four could live in that loft, comfortably.

"Just the night. I only come here when I have business in the city. I return to my castle tomorrow." He walked over to the kitchen and pulled wine from a closet. "Where do you live?"

Allyn shrugged. "I'm in between places right now."

"What does that mean exactly?" Conall asked as he poured wine into two glasses.

"It means that I am living with friends until I figure out what I'm going to do next."

He turned on music and Allyn couldn't help the smile that came to her face as soft, classical music came from the speakers installed on the ceiling.

She stood there in the foyer as Conall took off his suit jacket, revealing a black vest over his navy-blue collared shirt.

When Allyn opened her eyes, she glanced over her shoulder. "This makes me miss my violin."

Memories of playing her violin in the living room of their wood cabin came to her. Her mother used to knit her sweaters before the fire, a smile on her face as her dear girl played her favorite songs. Father would take a break from grading papers for the high school in town to critique her. She used to hate it when he'd find the smallest error in her playing but missed those evenings more than anything.

"Well, aren't you full of surprises?"

"My father used to play this song a lot when I was growing up," she said, closing her eyes and humming along with the melody of the violin.

"Did he? I'd like to hear about him."

"He's a music teacher," she said. "He used to play for your father. You may not remember, but we've met once before."

Conall turned to her, a smile on his face. "I wondered if you remembered me."

Allyn spun around to him. "What?" Her hands fell to her sides. "You actually remembered me—this entire time?"

He nodded and her face flushed. "You're kidding me."

"I'm not."

They'd only been ten years old when her father brought her along to the central palace for a private concert. She'd been allowed to play with the young prince in the gardens and playrooms for just one weekend, and she never forgot the fun they'd shared. That was one of the last good memories she had before her life took a turn for the worst.

"Wow," she said. "You're the one that's full of surprises."

"How could I forget the girl with the red hair? I noticed you immediately when you came down the stairs tonight."

"Conall," Allyn whispered. "I think you might be right about the whole fate thing."

He shrugged. "I told you."

"Okay. So, tell me more about Prince Conall Baran."

"What is there? Everyone knows of the curse of the Wolf. It is a part of my clan and part of Elastria's history."

Allyn sat down on one of the bar stools at his kitchen island. "I'm sure there is more to you than your subjects know. Like your twin brother, Lennox. What's his deal?"

The way Conall's face paled at the mention of his brother made her wish she hadn't brought him up.

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t talk about him,” he said but didn’t elaborate. Instead, he walked over and handed her a glass of red wine.

She took a sip. “I’m sorry. I just thought with the two of you still living in the original Baran castle, you’d be close,” she said.

“We aren’t,” he snapped.

Allyn held onto her wine glass, the tension thickening in the room. Even when they met as children, Lennox wasn’t around. She didn’t understand the division between twins but knew better to press the issue. She didn’t need to learn all of his secrets in one night.

For one, she wasn’t ready to tell hers.

She smiled and tried to lighten the mood. “I haven’t had so much alcohol in all of my life. Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“If you need to take it easy, my feelings won’t be hurt. Would you like some water?”

Allyn drank a bit more. “I’m fine.” Her mind went to Aude and Khia and what they would think if she didn’t return soon. “I should probably tell my friends where I am.”

“Don’t worry. I sent Edan a text. He told them where you are and will make sure they are taken care of.”

“Oh,” she said and sat up straight. “What do you want to do now since we have a few more hours together?”

Conall shrugged. “We can just talk if you’d like. I haven’t seen you in years and would love to know what you’ve been up to. Hannah was never much of a conversationalist. She seemed to enjoy the sound of her own voice that nothing she said had much depth.”

“But, you stayed with her for nine months. There must have been *something* you liked.”

“She was pretty, and there’s always been a lot of pressure to settle down.” He leaned back against the counter with a sigh. “But, like I said, she was a great actress. It was hard to tell when the act was over and when she was being real. You know?”

Allyn stared at him. He tried to hide that he was hurt, but she could see right through his façade. She saw her own pain reflected in his ice-blue eyes.

“Yes. I know exactly what you mean. My ex did nothing but lie to me. On top of that, he’s probably with another woman right now.” She made light of it, though the idea ate at her each night.

“Damn. As far as I know, Hannah never cheated. She was just a liar.”

“Well, lucky you.” Allyn drank her wine down, no longer caring about how drunk she got. As long as she didn’t become sloppy, she didn’t care.

He picked up the wine bottle and poured her some more. “I’m the cursed one,” he said. “There isn’t much luck involved.”

I know more than you think.

She watched the red liquid fill her glass. This wasn’t the way she envisioned her night. Just hours ago, she thought she’d be sitting in her dark apartment with a bunch of candles and a bowl of canned soup.

Now, she was drinking wine with the prince of Elastria…the future king.

The music changed to a more upbeat song and Allyn’s body warmed from within. She smiled, suddenly wanting to dance, but not quite drunk enough to do so alone in the middle of the Prince Conall’s living room.

“This is weird,” Allyn said, her smile fading as she looked up to Conall.

He lifted a brow. “What is?”

“I can’t get over that I’m sitting here with a prince, talking about my ex. What is happening right now? Is this real?”

Conall’s charming smile returned and he took her glass from her hands. She watched him set her glass on the black marble countertop and turn her barstool to face him. He leaned down to her level and looked her right in the eyes.

“Allyn Carmody. This is real, and I think you’re done drinking.”

Her head spun and she could barely keep her eyes open. “Why?” she asked in a whisper and nearly fell from the stool.

He caught her in his arms.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.” Allyn started to panic. She gripped Conall’s shoulders as fear flashed before her eyes.

No. Get it together. She should have known better. Such reckless drinking could ruin everything. If she didn’t control her body, she didn’t want to think of what could happen.

Allyn tried to stand and found that she didn’t have control over her legs. She groaned, her head thumping as she tried to clear her vision. It took everything within her to keep the magic within.

Kiss him.

Kill him.

End his life before he ends yours.

The voices wouldn’t shut up.

Conall picked her up and her head fell back, her hair swinging as he carried her from the kitchen. Her eyes were glazed over as she looked at the vaulted ceiling. She didn’t know where she was going and had no control.

The last thought she had before she passed out struck terror in her soul.

He knows who I am…and he drugged me. What a clever Wolf.

CHAPTER 7

FOR ONCE, ALLYN wished the sun would have stayed away.

She didn't want to face the morning, and what would follow. When she opened her eyes, she was alone on a large bed with white blankets covering her. She sat up, her hair falling into her face. She pushed it back and looked around. Her head ached, but she vaguely remembered the events of the evening.

"Prince Conall?"

There was no reply. Conall was nowhere to be found. All that surrounded her were fluffy white pillows and the softest blankets she'd ever felt. She was inclined to lie back down and let her body melt into the mattress.

Instead, Allyn tried to stand. She doubled over and groaned. She knew that she'd overdone it with the alcohol. The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs startled her.

She stood, still a bit drunk, and watched as Conall came up the stairs in a pair of maroon pajama pants and a T-shirt.

God, he looked good with wet messy hair and clothes that clung to his muscled arms and chest. A hint of his abs shown through the white cotton and she forced her gaze to return to his face.

"So," she said, forcing a sheepish smile. "Princes sleep in old T-shirts just like everyone else. Good to know."

He chuckled and shook his head as he crossed his arms. "How are you feeling?"

Shrugging, Allyn looked down, realizing that she was still in the dress Aude and Khia had let her borrow. “I’ve been better. Thank you for taking care of me.”

“Of course. I shouldn’t have given you more wine.”

“You couldn’t have known how much of a lightweight I am.”

“True.” He nodded toward the half-wall that overlooked the rest of the apartment. “I’m making waffles if you’re keen.”

Allyn licked her lips. “Yes. Please.”

He clasped his hands together. “Good. I think it will help soak up some of the alcohol. I’ll put some bacon on too.”

“Wow,” she said under her breath. “He cooks.”

“I heard that,” he said, a crooked grin on his lips. “Why don’t you take a shower and meet me in the dining room. It should be ready soon.”

Allyn glanced at his bathroom. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I did,” Conall said. “There are fresh clothes on the vanity. I had Eden pick some up for you.”

“Damn. You’re too good to be true.”

He laughed again and turned to head back down the stairs. “Try not to pass out in the shower, Miss Carmody.”

Allyn smiled despite her throbbing headache. Whatever was happening, she wasn’t complaining.

Once he was gone, she walked across the cool dark wood floor to the pristine, white bathroom and turned on the shower. Her eyes widened with delight at how many shower heads sprouted hot water into the rectangular shower. She clapped her hands and almost squealed with excitement. She hadn’t had a hot shower in weeks since the power was cut off. She was lucky to have water at all and found herself having to run all of the taps throughout the day and night to keep the pipes from freezing.

This, she could get used to. She slid the dress off of her shoulders and watched the mirror fog with steam.

Too bad she’d be sent back to the streets at any moment.

After her shower, Allyn put on a pair of black pants that she tucked into flat slate-gray boots and an evergreen sweater. She glanced at herself in the mirror, pulling her hair into a ponytail and pleased with Edan’s taste in clothes.

The smell of bacon and coffee ushered her from the bathroom and down the tall, winding, black stairs that led to the main floor. Prince

Conall stood behind the island, making their plates. With the push of a button, a television lowered from the ceiling, its screen curved inward. The images of the imperial news channel played before the screen in 3D that one could almost touch.

Allyn watched scenes of riots in the neighboring kingdom and her brows furrowed. “Goodness. It’s getting pretty bad.”

“Same stuff. Different day.” Conall glanced at the screen and changed the channel to a documentary on how the pyramids were leveled during the war.

“I suppose,” she said.

“Hungry?”

She nodded, licking her lips as she looked down at the pretty plates he’d made. She hadn’t eaten such a well-balanced and colorful meal in ages. Fresh fruit, waffles with butter and syrup and bacon made her mouth water. Her stomach grumbled when he picked up the plates.

“Let’s sit on the balcony,” he said and led her across the floor to the enclosed balcony that overlooked the white-covered city.

They sat at a black table and the soft hush of snow and sleet provided an ambient soundtrack to their breakfast. Hot coffee, sugar, cream and syrup already awaited them on the tabletop.

She took one bite of the crispy bacon and moaned. “This is so good.” The taste of maple, mixed with the salty flavor awakened her taste buds.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said and poured more syrup on his stack of waffles. “You mentioned your father last night. What about your mother? Tell me about her.”

Allyn tilted her head, looking into her cup of coffee. “She died when I was a little girl.”

Conall paused pouring the syrup. He lowered the bottle. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. It was a long time ago. I just hate that it was so sudden. She wasn’t even sick.”

“That’s awful,” Conall said, shaking his head. “I lost my mother as a child as well.”

Allyn nodded. “I know. We have something else in common.”

“More than I’d anticipated.”

“Me too,” she said softly. Everything within her told her to shut up right then and not reveal any more of her past, but her heart silenced her

head. “My father sent me away to the convent after my mother died. I guess he couldn’t look at me since we looked so similar.”

“Damn. The nuns were nice to you at least?”

No. They were horrid bitches.

“Sure. They were okay,” she lied, keeping the disdain from scrunching up her nose as she looked at him.

He didn’t ask any more questions and she was grateful.

The silence between them was comfortable as they ate everything on their plates.

“Thank you for everything,” she said once she finished the last of her waffle. She sipped some of her coffee and pulled her legs into her chest, getting comfy in her chair.

He drank the rest of his coffee and gave her a curious look.

Allyn wasn’t sure what it was, but something was different. Her stomach dropped when she realized that getting drunk and sloppy probably ruined her chances with him. Who was she kidding? He probably was disappointed that they didn’t get to sleep together.

“No worries,” he said and stretched his arms over his head. He watched her for a moment, before turning his attention to the cityscape. “I’m glad we crossed paths again.”

Water and slush trailed down the glass on the outside, and all of the pretty lights from the night were gone. Just buildings and snow-covered streets.

“Me too,” Allyn said as she stood and walked to the railing. “I think that weekend is one of my favorite memories. Do you remember the game we played in your treehouse when we were kids?”

Conall left the table and joined her. She tensed when he stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

She could barely think with him that close to her, but tried to hide her anxiety. He brushed her hair from her neck and over her shoulder.

When he kissed the back of her neck, her eyes fluttered closed.

“I do,” he whispered, and she licked her lips. “Its one of my favorite memories as well. I didn’t get much of an opportunity to be a child, but meeting you showed me a glimpse of a better life.”

Allyn turned to him, beaming. “Really?”

He pressed her body to the railing and nodded. “One thing you’ll learn about me is that I say what I mean. Unlike my brother, I am honest.”

Allyn nodded, relieved to hear it. The entire kingdom knew of the menace Prince Lennox was. It was refreshing to learn that Conall was different. She didn't doubt a word he said.

Her mind raced as she imagined a possible life with Conall. It was a long shot, but there was *something* there. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she took a chance—one she prayed would be worth it—and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Prince Conall took the hint and kissed her, his lips pressing to hers as he lifted her by her thighs. Her heart sang as his kisses left her mouth and moved to her throat and clavicle.

Allyn didn't care that they could possibly be seen from the window as he lifted her sweater over her head and tossed it to the balcony floor. Exposed, delicious heat raced up her thighs.

Their eyes met and he kissed her again, holding her by the waist.

"I want you," he whispered, and she couldn't help the smile that came to her face.

"Then, have me," she said.

CHAPTER 8

He carried her from the balcony and back inside. They didn't need to speak as he crossed the living room and carried her up the stairs to his bedroom in the loft.

Her heart sped as he laid her on the bed, and climbed on top of her.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Conall asked, taking off his shirt. "If things are moving too fast, just let me know."

Allyn licked her lips at the sight of his bare chest, rippled with muscles and abs that were so tight, she imagined them being hard as stone.

"Are you kidding?" she asked as he took off his pants. She gulped once he took off his boxers, and revealed his hardened manhood to her.

Such perfection should be illegal.

She'd only ever been with one other person, and he'd betrayed her. It was time for her to stop guarding her heart and see what it was like with another. Her heart told her that he was worth the risk.

Conall reached inside the nightstand and pulled out a condom. Once it was on, Allyn took him by the hands, pulling him on top of her.

He grinned and kissed her once again before tugging her pants off.

She exhaled, a bit nervous as he looked at her body. He delicately took off her black panties and kissed her thighs.

"You're beautiful, Allyn," he said, softly, and slid his hands along her back.

Allyn tensed, and Conall froze.

Their eyes met and she sucked in a breath. For a second, she'd almost forgot about the hundreds of scars that marred her back.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice on the brink of being angry. He took a glance at her back and she closed her eyes in shame.

“Who did this to you?”

Allyn’s lips trembled. “The nuns. In the convent.” She drew in another breath. “They beat me.”

Conall tilted her chin and made her look at him. Without a word, he turned and showed her his back.

She gasped, and touched the scars that covered his back. While tattoos were placed meticulously to hide them, Allyn could feel each raised line along his flesh.

“My father,” he said before she could ask.

She pursed her lips. She didn’t need to ask. She knew what he meant.

When he turned back to her, she pulled him back onto her, her arms around his neck as their tongues explored one another’s.

How many people knew about Conall’s scars? Allyn doubted that anyone did, and that candid moment brought them closer in ways neither expected.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you again,” Conall said, and Allyn smiled through tears.

She giggled and wiped her eyes. “Ignore my tears. I’ve just heard those words before, but something tells me you actually mean them. Tell me you mean them.”

“I do,” Conall said and parted her legs.

Allyn’s eyes fluttered closed, a moan escaping her lips as thrust into her.

“Wow,” she said in a breathy whisper.

The intense pleasure filled her completely.

There were times when she was sure she would explode, and as if he could read her body, he would slow down and prolong the pleasure that verged on the brink of being torture.

He withdrew from inside of her and knelt onto the floor between her legs. He worshiped her dripping wet core, licking the slick slit with a tenderness and lust that had her squirming beneath his tongue.

She pulled herself up to her elbows and looked down at him, her brows furrowed. She was dying for release.

She fell back onto the bed and whimpered. He returned to sucking her clit, his fingers dipping inside of her.

He pulled her closer by her thighs and she lost it. Her body convulsed as she came on his tongue as it continued circling her gushing core. The sensitivity of it was maddening and she cried out.

She sucked in a breath as he pulled her to her feet and turned her around. Her legs were wet with her own juices, and he pushed them apart from behind.

Conall bent her over, and to her surprise, he rubbed her clit, waking her up again, and slid into her from behind. Her lips parted as he rocked inside of her at a slow and tender pace.

He held her by her waist and kept the pace that was maddening. It was better than any moment she'd shared with Byron.

"Allyn," he said, filling her with his hard, thick manhood.

"Yes?"

He pulled her hair back, making her arch her back. "You know you're mine now, don't you?"

Allyn couldn't help the grin that came to her face. "I do," she said as each thrust sent her further and further into oblivion.

She gasped as he withdrew, spun her around to face him, and picked her up, spearing her with his manhood. She held onto his neck as he held her up. "Oh god," she whispered, risking a look into his ethereal blue eyes, and together they climaxed.

This cursed creature was more beautiful than anything she'd ever seen. No man could compare, and for a few moments, he was all hers. That's all she wanted.

That thought exhilarated her as she realized something.

He was just as vulnerable as she was. With that thought, she leaned down and kissed him, sucking his lip and nibbling it between her teeth.

Conall wrapped his arms around her and held her close as he set her onto the bed and lied beside her.

"Promise me that this isn't a dream," he whispered to her. "I don't think I'd be able to take waking up and not having you here."

Those words reverberated through her soul. She traced her name on his chest, over his heart. "If it is a dream, at least we're in it together."

CHAPTER 9

TWO DAYS PASSED as Conall and Allyn locked themselves in his loft and explored each other's bodies and minds.

He was meant to leave the morning after the party, but delayed his trip one more day. It was a gesture that made Allyn feel valued—something rare in her years.

In bed, they'd watched their favorite movies and ordered delivery from the kitchens.

The sun began to set on the third day and Prince Conall took Allyn by the hand.

She dreaded what she knew he was about to say. They'd just finished dinner and the wind howled outside.

"I should probably get you home before the storm gets worse."

Disappointed, Allyn's shoulders slumped. "Why?"

"I've already stayed longer than I should. I have to leave for the season."

She nodded, chewing her bottom lip. "I guess." She didn't want to go back. Couldn't she just wait out the season with him? She shook her head and harrumphed at her stupid ideas. No one wanted her freeloading.

But, a girl could hope.

"You don't look too happy about that," he said from across the table. He leaned onto his elbows, the tips of his black hair brushing his long, dark lashes.

She glanced at him to see an amused look on his face. His eyes were narrowed and there was a slight curve to his lips as he watched her.

She shrugged, blinking. “There isn’t much *to be* happy about. But, that’s life. Isn’t it.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” he said, softly. He brushed his thumb across his lips and Allyn wanted nothing more than to climb across the table and kiss his full, supple lips.

Swallowing, she forced herself to look away from his lips. The urge to kiss him was far too intense. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe when the season is over we can get together again.”

A ray of hope pierced through her heart, lighting the darkness. She perked up. “Yes,” she blurted. “Why must we wait, though?”

“I go away every winter season,” he said. “But, I’ll be back in the spring, and I will come for you.”

“Do you promise?”

He smiled and reached for her hand. Once hers were secure in his hand, he looked her in the eyes. “I always keep my promises.”

“I believe you,” she said, searching his eyes and only seeing truth.

“Something tells me we were supposed to meet. I can’t explain it, but I believe in fate. Don’t you?”

“I do,” Allyn said. She kept the hundreds of questions she had for him within. She didn’t want to ruin his promise. “Okay. We will meet again in the spring,” she said, a smile taking over her face. She hadn’t been so excited since she was told she could leave the convent on her eighteenth birthday.

“It’s settled. I will come for you when the winter ends,” he said, and Allyn realized that she finally had something good to look forward to.

CHAPTER 10

CONALL RODE WITH Allyn back to Aude and Khia's building, and she couldn't have been more grateful.

She wanted to prolong their time together for as long as possible. She saw within him a soul just as lost as she was. When he held her hand, she was at peace.

She smiled at him from her spot in the back seat of his car as the driver drove down the empty streets of the city. She was sure that she was dreaming and prayed that it would never end. She just needed to get through the winter without a hitch, and they could build on the bond they'd forged over the past few days.

They'd started something beautiful and wonderful.

What could go wrong?

"Conall," Allyn called.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember kissing me in your tree house?"

He smiled at her and nodded. "Who could forget their first kiss?"

Allyn sat up, surprised. "Really? I was your first kiss?"

Chuckling, he shrugged. "We were ten. Had you kissed anyone before me?"

"No. I didn't kiss anyone else until I met Byron. How sad is that? I was twenty-two," she said with a laugh.

"It's not sad. It just goes to show how different you are from other women."

"I am different," Allyn whispered. "But it hasn't won me any medals so far."

“I wouldn’t say that,” Conall said, reaching for her hand. “You have me now.”

Allyn held onto his hand, afraid that if she let go, he’d vanish.

Once the car parked before the Aude and Khia’ building, Conall stepped out of the car and into the snow storm.

“I’ve got it,” he said to the driver.

Allyn watched him walk around the front, unaffected by the torrents of snow. It was as if he didn’t even notice that the world was raging around him. He opened the door for her. She stepped out and together they went into the building. The doorman bowed, his eyes wide when he noticed that the imperial prince stood before him.

Wiping snow from her face and hair, Allyn looked to Conall who stood there with his hands in his pockets. She could tell that he didn’t want to leave her.

Why did he have to go? Why couldn’t he just take her back to his castle?

She bit her tongue and kept her questions to herself.

“Thank you for walking me in,” she said, and before she could say anything more, Conall wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her.

His kiss was soft, sweet, but there was a desperation there that broke her heart.

“Don’t go,” she whispered before she could stop herself.

Conall pulled away, his face flushed. Her heart raced as he stared at her, such conflict in his eyes that it scared her.

“I have to,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Allyn. Wait for me.”

With that, he left.

Despite the heat inside the building, Allyn felt cold.

Alone.

She ran to the glass walls and pressed her hands to the glass as she watched the car pull away.

Why did she always lose whatever good came into her life? She remembered being disappointed when she and her father left the palace years ago.

This was worst. Her stomach muscles were clenched with anxiety for watching him leave.

“I’ll wait,” she said, tears filling her eyes. “I promise.”

~

CONALL WASN'T SURE why leaving her was so difficult, but a pain in his heart nagged him the entire ride back to his castle. Thoughts of her sweet smile and even sweeter kiss haunted him as they drove through the woods with trees that stretched high into the gray sky.

Conall needed something good in his life, and seeing the girl he'd met as a child was a beacon of hope that things might get better.

He just had to make it through winter.

He hadn't planned on actually connecting with a woman right after breaking up with Hannah, but that's exactly what happened with Allyn. There was something about her that made him comfortable around her to the point where he knew that if they spent more time together, he'd actually open up.

That was scary, but that's what he'd been searching for his entire life. For as long as Conall could remember, he'd been a private person. He never revealed his true feelings to anyone, except his mother. When she died, so did his hope to find another woman to love him.

Edan called and Conall answered via his implanted device. "Are the preparations made?"

"Yes," Edan said. "Everything is set up. I made sure that the guards are prepared to look over the castle once you leave."

"Good," Conall said with a sigh. "I'll be there soon."

"Okay, your highness. How did it go with the young lady?"

Conall closed his eyes, clinging to the memory of her green eyes, and the adoration she shone upon him. Hannah never looked at him that way. How could a few days together have such an impact?

"She's perfect," Conall said. "It went well. Too well. I almost let her stay too long."

"That isn't your fault, your highness."

"I know," Conall said with a sigh. "Thank you for your help, Edan."

"Anytime. You know that my family and I owe you ours lives. I'm happy to help."

"You don't owe me anything but your friendship."

"We do, though."

Conall shook his head. He hated to hear Edan speak that way. It was his duty to look after good people.

“Edan,” Conall called.

“Yes?”

“Look after her while I’m away. Just check on her from time to time and make sure she has what she needs. She mentioned being in between homes. I fear she might be in financial trouble.”

“Of course. I’ll make sure she makes it through the winter, comfortably.”

“Do your best to keep Lennox from her, will you?”

There was a brief silence. “I will try.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Conall ended the call and sighed. At least he had someone to check on her for him. He glanced at the sky. The moon was visible in the daytime just before the Winter Winds came to ravage his kingdom. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain in his chest.

Like an itch that he couldn’t scratch, the pain tormented him, and it was stronger than ever now that winter was settling in.

He ran his hands through his hair and closed his eyes against tears once he looked down to see clumps of his thick black hair laced between his fingers.

It had already begun. His sickness was manifesting, and there was nothing he could do.

Conall balled his hand into a fist. At least Allyn didn’t have to see him like this.

He’d never felt such an intense spark with any other woman. Why did he have to feel it now?

With her.

Timing was never on his side, and winter was his least favorite season.

Winter was when the curse did its most dastardly deeds.

CHAPTER 11

TWO WEEKS PASSED, and Allyn hadn't heard a word from Prince Conall.

She just clung to the promise he'd made her. Their time together kept entering her mind and making her smile. She wasn't sure why he couldn't be with her during the winter season, but she forced herself to stay busy.

She sat on the couch, reading a book while Aude and Khia curled up together and watched a movie. A ringing of the doorbell startled her. She looked up but relaxed when she remembered that she no longer had to worry about the debtors. They'd already taken everything from her. She had nothing left to give.

There was an odd solace to that.

Khia frowned. "Who could that be? Are you expecting anyone, babe?"

"No," Aude said, shaking her head as Khia crossed the room, her black heels clicking along the dark wooden floor.

Conall? Hope sprouted forth and Allyn perked up, closing her book. She sat on her knees and watched Khia go to the door. Her heart was in her throat as the anticipation flooded her body. *Please. Please.*

When she opened the door, Allyn gasped. The color drained from her face.

No.

A tall, thin man with shaggy brown hair stood there, his once dreamy brown eyes red-rimmed as they looked Allyn's way.

"Baby," Byron called, stepping inside the door, barely acknowledging Khia who was the same height as him.

Khia put her hands on her hips and glared at his back. “Excuse me,” she said. “But no one told you that you could come in.”

He held a hand out to her. “Just give me a minute. I’ve come for Allyn.”

The nerve. How dare he come back after weeks with no word?

Allyn stood from the couch as he approached. She shook her head, backing away. “Taking me where? We have no home. You made sure that I ended up with nothing.”

“Darling,” he said, smiling.

Allyn pursed her lips as she looked at him.

“I am not your darling anymore.” It hurt to say that after giving him her body, heart, and all of her money. Tears stung her eyes but she willed them away. “God, I’m tired of crying over you, Byron. You can’t just come back and act as if nothing happened.”

“I know, baby. Come here.” He approached her, his arms wide. “I’ve missed your pretty face.”

“Where have you been?”

He wrapped his arms around her, ignoring her question as his hands smoothed her back “You smell delicious,” he said, kissing her neck.

“Don’t touch me.” Allyn pushed him away, her brows knitting. “Are you high?”

Byron shook his head, though she could smell it on him. “Of course not. I’m good.”

“Then what the hell are you smiling about. The landlord evicted us and the debtors came and took all of our stuff…the stuff I worked my ass off to pay for.”

“Hey,” he said, reaching for her. “I am smiling because I have good news. I have a job waiting for me in New Prussia. We are set. It pays enough that you won’t have to work two jobs anymore. I can finally pay off all of my debts, and take care of *you*.”

“Bullshit,” Aude said, her brows knitted. “No one believes your lies anymore, Byron.”

“Shut up,” he said, his smile morphing into a scowl. He shot a look at Allyn. “I told you that you should stay away from these girls. Look at them, trying to turn you into a lesbian.”

“God, you are stupid,” Aude said, her cheeks reddening.

“Byron. I’m going to ask you to leave one more time,” Khia said. Her voice was surprisingly calm considering how he’d insulted her and her girlfriend. But, the look in her eyes betrayed her words.

“Just give me a minute,” he shot back at her. He reached a hand out toward Allyn. “Come on, Allyn.” His voice turned harsh.

That’s the Byron she didn’t miss.

“Get your stuff and let’s go.”

“Don’t you dare go with him,” Aude hissed.

Allyn’s heart raced. She had no desire to patch things up with Byron, not after connecting with Prince Conall.

“No,” she said, surprising herself. For once she was prepared to stand up for herself.

Byron looked shocked. “What?”

“I’m not going with you. Please, just leave.”

Byron shook his head with a sigh. “While I had hopes that you wanted to come with me to New Prussia, I found out something that I thought you should know. I just didn’t want to have to tell you in front of your friends, but your father is sick.”

“What?” Panic filled Allyn’s veins at the mention of her father. She grabbed Byron’s forearm. “Tell me what’s happened.”

“I went to your old village to tie up some loose ends at the night club I used to play at. I heard that your dad hadn’t been to the school in weeks. He has some kind of brain tumor.”

“Damn it,” Allyn said, covering her mouth with her hands. She looked to Aude and Khia. “I have to go. There is no way around it.”

Aude hurried over to hug her. She squeezed Allyn tightly. “I know, honey. You don’t have to explain anything to us. You go take care of your father.”

Khia hugged her as well, wrapping her arms around the both of them. “Take care of yourself, Allyn. You’re always welcome here.”

Allyn fought tears. “Thank you.”

“Get your things,” Byron said.

Glaring at him, Allyn walked to the door and opened it. “I don’t have anything left. Let’s just go.”

With a smug look on his face, he followed her outside.

As she left their studio apartment, her heart thumped in her chest. She hoped there was enough time to make it to her father before the Winter

Winds reached their peak speed and ferocity.

She cursed under her breath as she watched blankets of thick snow fall from the sky. She couldn't believe how Byron made his way into the city.

"Come on, babe. Let's make it quick."

"Are you sure? It looks pretty bad out there."

"Yeah. This car has a shovel grill, it will smooth out and push away some of the snow."

She put her gloves on. "Okay," she said and he opened the glass door.

The howling of the wind through the buildings was a deafening roar, and the sudden burst of chilled air assaulted her face.

She fought the snow and wind to get across the sidewalk and into his car. "How did you get a pass to be out during the season?"

Byron winked at her. "I have connections."

She looked into his eyes, and something took her breath away. A hidden truth stared her in the eyes, but she couldn't tell what it was.

She looked ahead, suddenly doubting her decision.

"Ready?" Byron asked as he turned on the car's ignition and pulled out of the parking spot and onto the street.

Allyn swallowed. "Yes. Let's hurry before the storm gets worse."

He nodded, and away they went down the snow-covered road.

Two weeks ago she thought she'd be happy to see Byron again. Now, he was the bringer of bad news and she was left desperately trying to make sense of the warnings that churned inside her stomach.

CHAPTER 12

HOURS DRAGGED ON in silence as Byron drove from the city.

They entered the Briar Woods that encircled all of Elastria. The birch trees were bare except for thin icy branches, with etchings along their white trunks that reached toward the sky.

Byron seemed to tense, his eyes checking his dashboard every few minutes.

“Is everything okay?” Allyn asked. “Do we have enough fuel to get to the next station?”

He nodded, scowling at the dashboard. “It’s the check engine light I’m a little worried about.”

She sighed. “Of course. I’m starting to wonder if we are cursed, Byron. Since the day we met, everything has gone wrong.”

His eye twitched, his jaw tightening. “Nothing to worry about. We are going to make it.”

“That’s what you say about everything, and it hasn’t been true so far.”

“I can handle this.”

As he said those words, the car sputtered to a stop in the center of the pitch black road.

“Like I said,” Allyn whispered. “Cursed.” She couldn’t believe that they’d broken down seconds after she asked him about the car’s condition.

“Fuck,” he said and slammed his hands into the steering wheel.

Allyn pursed her lips, looking out her window into the darkness of the woods on either side of the car. The hairs on her neck stood on end as the

little bit of heat that the car had struggled to putter faded. She shivered and glanced at Byron who sat there in silence.

“We can walk,” he suddenly said and Allyn’s brows rose.

“You’re kidding me.” Allyn threw up her hands, fed up with his awful decisions. “Walk where? I haven’t seen any stations or signs for anything in miles.”

He looked at her. “I have a friend that lives close by. He will let us stay with him for the night and I can call a mechanic in the morning.”

“We can’t afford a—”

“Enough, Allyn! Just shut up for once.”

She was startled by his outburst.

“I know what I’m doing.”

Bottling her own anger and annoyance, she looked away, her skin starting to heat with rage.

Best to just keep quiet, she thought, balling her fists. She closed her eyes and exhaled. How many years had it taken for her to learn to control her rage? If the nuns at the convent were good at anything, it was teaching her to bottle her anger.

Byron had no idea what he dared to awaken within her.

Deep breaths, Allyn.

A sudden surge of wind blasted into the car as Byron opened his door and got out. Cursing into the air, he stepped into the night and slammed his door. She watched him come around to her side and she dreaded getting out when he opened her door.

“Come on,” he said. “The faster we start walking, the faster we will get there and get warm.”

Her eyelashes flickered as the wind blew at her face.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered, wishing she’d stayed with Aude and Khia.

The kindness she’d wanted to see from Byron had ended the moment he’d gotten her into his car. Now, he seemed to be agitated.

“Who is this friend of yours? You never told me that you knew someone that lived on the outskirts of Elastria.”

He walked from the street and into the woods without looking back to make sure she was close behind. Afraid to be left alone, Allyn hurried to catch up with him. Her heels stabbed the icy earth as she scurried into the woods.

The sting of frostbitten flesh made Allyn wince as her cheeks tightened and seemed to crack. She rubbed her hands together, desperate for some small measure of warmth as Byron led her down a worn path through the woods. She pulled her coat closer, shivering, as her eyes scanned the darkness that smothered them.

Trees surrounded them—skinny trees that reached high to the black sky were now covered in a cloak of white snow that continued to fall in fierce torrents.

“Did you hear my question? Who is your friend?” Allyn asked, her teeth chattering.

Byron sighed. “You don’t know him.”

After what seemed to be an eternity of bone-chilling wind and darkness, Byron paused once the path opened to a road.

“We are almost there,” he said, pointing up ahead to black gates that emerged from the forest of silver and white. His brown hair lifted with the wind, and he pulled the black hood of his leather jacket over his head.

Allyn’s eyes widened as she looked at the black castle at the top of the hill. The height of the towers that stood behind the gates was astounding, with seemingly no end as if they reached directly into space, yet she knew that it was only the fog that hid the tops.

“What is this place?” she asked, her heart racing as she stared at the stained glass windows that stretched from the floor to ceiling on the front side of the castle.

There was something about this place that she didn’t like. If it wasn’t for the debilitating cold, she’d have turned around and returned to Byron’s broken down car almost a mile away.

As she paused along the path, a raging wind pushed her backward. Her red hair whipped around her face, blinding her, as she fell onto her bottom.

She cried out as the wind continued to push her down the slippery, icy road.

She flailed, trying to catch onto something, only to find sharp shards of ice and a loud roar. Her heart raced as she realized that she was defenseless against the Winter Winds.

The ice had cut through her gloves, leaving her in pain and with bloody palms. In the distance, she heard Byron calling her name, but as she relaxed her body, the wind picked her up and shot her body into the dark depths of the woods.

Is this it? Is this how I'm going to die?

Allyn's mouth parted as the cold air encircled her and slammed her body into something hard, knocking her out.

CHAPTER 13

ALLYN WAS FORCED to her knees before the cross, her back raw from being whipped for what felt like an eternity, her small face streaked with tears.

Allyn was twelve years old.

Sister Catherine yanked her by a handful of hair. “Look at Him. If you repent, He will strip the demons from you.”

Lips trembling, Allyn nodded. “I pray to Him every night. I repent. What else am I supposed to do?”

Sister Catherine knelt beside her and took Allyn’s face into her hands, pressing her cheeks.

A chill ran along Allyn’s exposed flesh as she looked into the Sister’s eyes. Why was she crying? She wasn’t the one that had been beaten for a power that she couldn’t control.

To her surprise, Sister Catherine pulled her into a tight embrace. She whispered to her, while the other nuns looked on, their faces free of every emotion except hate for the little witch they’d been forced to look after.

“You better learn how to control this power, Allyn, or they will *kill* you.”

Those words resonated through her, striking fear into her heart. She bit her bottom lip, her brows knitting together as hot tears gushed from her eyes. She nodded.

“I will try.”

“There’s something in you that will change the world, but you have to survive,” the nun said, and Allyn’s breath caught in her throat.

“What do you mean?” Allyn asked.

Instead of replying, Sister Catherine came to her feet and looked to the others. “A night of repenting should banish the evil within her.”

The other nuns nodded, except Sister Margaret—the cruelest of them all.

“What did you say to her?” Sister Margaret asked, her blue eyes fixed on Sister Catherine.

“I told her to repent for her sins, and beg the Lord for forgiveness.”

Sister Margaret didn’t seem convinced. “A night in the sanctuary is not enough. Those that are detestable to the Lord should be removed from those that are clean.” She shot a look at the youngest nun, Sister Anne. “Take her to the well outside.”

Allyn screamed when they took her from the sanctuary. “No! Not the well! Please!” Red flames shot from her fingertips, racing up her arms and nearly engulfing her. Unable to control it, the flames lashed out, wavered, and flew all around her without any control or prejudice for who it struck with its fiery assault.

A gasp came from the nuns, and they all bowed in prayer.

Sister Margaret stormed over and slapped Allyn so hard that she was nearly knocked out.

She was still lucid, barely. But, the flames died down as she tried to get a grip on reality.

“Tomorrow,” Sister Margaret said, heaving. “We call the priest.”

CHAPTER 14

ALLYN WOKE UP in a pool of sweat that made her clothes cling to her body. The nightmares were back, and she couldn't shake the dread that filled her entire body. Those memories had been tucked deep into the darkest crevices of her mind, yet they sometimes came back, ready to ruin any hopes for happiness.

She never told her father about her treatment. She kept that secret to spare him any more pain than he already had. Still, those nights in the darkness of the well would forever haunt her. She had yet to see or experience anything more terrifying.

She sat up, greeted by an eerie darkness that made her skin crawl. The silence that surrounded her was unnerving, and it was cold. Her breath puffed from her lips in a fog before her face.

This was the second time she'd woken up in a stranger's bed, and fear settled in much quicker when she realized that she had no clue where she was.

She pulled thick covers from beneath her chin and sat up. A screeching sound came from outside, and her eyes shot to the large oval window that looked out to the wintry outdoors.

It's just the wind, Allyn told herself as she looked around the room decorated with expensive furniture that looked as if it belonged to another time. Vintage, elaborate, and beautiful. She realized that the bed she was in had a black canopy with sheer white drapes that cascaded around the top of the bed frame.

The large bedroom was the size of the apartment she'd shared with Byron. From the moonlight that shone onto her from between the open

crimson drapes, it appeared to have a vanity and a sitting room with two chairs facing a small library.

Allyn pulled her shirt from her chest to let air circulate and cool her. Her throat was dry, and her head pounded.

Where am I? She looked down at the white shirt she wore instead of the sweater and jeans she remembered wearing.

She tensed when someone turned the knob of the bedroom door. She looked around for a place to hide, panic setting in as she realized that there wasn't a closet, only a tall ornate wardrobe and that she didn't have the time to run to it and hide.

The door opened, and Allyn pulled the covers up when a slim older woman peeked in on her. Her white hair was pulled up in a tight bun at her nape, and she wore a black dress that went to her feet.

"You're awake," the woman said as she stepped into the room and turned on the lights.

Allyn winced at the sudden brightness. "I am. Who are you?" She licked her lips, uncertain if she should be afraid or grateful.

She folded her hands before her as she stood at the edge of the bed. "I am Calinda," the woman said, as Allyn noticed that her eyes were a bit too bright to be natural.

She wanted a closer look, to see why Calinda's eyes seemed to be white. Her hand covered her mouth as Calinda moved closer to her, her body floating above the ground, translucence to her body that sent chills up Allyn's spine.

Her face paled and she froze. "You're a ghost." Heart thumping in her chest, she wasn't sure what to make of the supernatural being before her.

Calinda smiled. "I am. We all are. The staff and guards, that is."

"What is this place? How did I get here?"

"Calm down," Calinda said, her emotionless eyes peering at her in the darkness. "You are safe."

"Where is Byron? Please tell me or I will scream."

"Scream? But, what would that do?"

The ghost before her didn't seem moved by Allyn's show of fear or her threats.

"The master will explain everything to you, miss. It's best that you just keep calm and wait until all things are explained. No need to fret, dear."

Allyn shivered, suddenly more afraid of the dark than she'd ever been. She'd heard voices since she was a child, but to *see* a ghost…

Had she gone mad?

Master? Why wouldn't Calinda tell her where Byron was? Was he okay?

Taking a chance, Allyn ran around the bed and made a mad dash for the door.

Calinda appeared before her, her tight smile fixed to her face like a painting. "Why don't you let me draw you a bath, miss? You've had quite the tumble in the storm out there. Master had to carry you up here in the dead of night, and I've been tending to you to make sure you didn't become ill. I must say, you are a strong one." Her eyes flickered down to Allyn's hands. "And you heal remarkably fast."

Hiding her hands, Allyn licked her lips. "Who carried me here?" Allyn's heart thumped in her chest as she tried to think of an escape, one that could outrun the ghostly figure before her. Instead, she stepped backward, suddenly doubting her courage as Calinda stared at her as if she could read her thoughts.

"I already said, miss. My master carried you."

"Take me to him," Allyn said, swallowing. She tried to look past Calinda at the dark hallway that seemed to go for miles behind her. "I'd like to thank him."

Calinda waved her back into the bedroom. "Not tonight. I'm sure he will want to meet you in the morning."

Allyn chewed her bottom lip, the skin cracked and bleeding onto the tip of her tongue. "Can I at least see Byron? Is he okay?" Maybe he had been hurt as well.

Calinda paused her advance on Allyn, her white eyes meeting hers. "Well, no. He's already left."

"What do you mean he's already left? Why would he leave me here?"

Calinda frowned. The lines in her white flesh deepened. "He didn't tell you?"

Warnings filled Allyn's stomach. Dread followed. What was this bizarre dream and when would she wake up in her bed with Byron by her side?

"Tell me what?" Allyn risked asking, wringing her hands in worry.

“That’s odd,” Calinda said, shaking her head. “I thought you knew… Byron sold you to pay off his debts.”

Allyn slumped onto the bed, her face paling. “Sold me?”

“Yes. He claimed the Witch’s Bounty.”

Tears clouded Allyn’s vision. How could he? Was anything he said about her father true?

But this…being sold. She’d never forgive Byron for doing the exact thing he promised to protect her from.

“So,” she began between sobs. “I’m prisoner here?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Allyn shook her head. She didn’t care to wipe the tears that trailed down her cheeks as her heart broke within her chest. “Who did he sell me to?”

Calinda’s eyes brightened. “To my master. Prince Lennox Baran.”

CHAPTER 15

PRINCE LENNOX STOOD at the window of his private quarters, looking at the storm that ravaged his land, cloaking it in a thick sheet of snow and ice.

It was early dawn, and he was ready to meet the woman he'd saved.

The woman that now belonged to him. Lennox rubbed his hands together. He hadn't been this excited in years.

"What should I tell the press about the mid-season ball?" Edan, his assistant asked, holding his tablet's stylus above the screen, ready to record everything Lennox said.

He didn't mind. Such thoroughness was why he hired him. Edan was young, eager to please, smart, and did whatever Lennox said without question. The fact that he also worked for Conall caused problems at times, but it also worked in his favor. This way, he could keep tabs on what Conall was up to.

Edan was alive—a human. That alone was enough for Lennox to keep him around, especially since it was a difficult task to convince a human to work in a castle that was haunted by servants that had been dead for centuries.

It was part of the curse after all, and he was their caretaker as much as they were his.

"Tell them that I am not hosting this year. I'll be leaving for Faustinia."

"What?" Edan swallowed, his caramel brown skin losing a bit of color. "But, I don't think that is wise. They aren't to keen on you at the moment."

Lennox raised a silver-white brow. "Did I ask what you thought?"

Edan shook his head. “No, your highness. My apologies,” he said, bowing his head. “I just urge you to be careful in enemy territory.”

“Duly noted. While they may be your enemy, they aren’t mine.” Lennox looked down at the tailor that altered his pants. “Almost done?” he asked, Lin, a small older man, dressed in all black with silver hair that was pulled into a ponytail.

“Yes, Prince Lennox,” he said, keeping his eyes down.

“One last thing. Is there anything you want to say to the press about the witch that was brought here last night?”

Lennox shrugged. “Let me think about it.”

“Of course, sir,” he said. “I will go tell the party planners that the plans have changed.”

“Very well,” Lennox replied. There was no way he was going to try to throw a ball right after Conall. No, he was going to do something better. Something forbidden. And now, he had an exotic date to show off.

“I’m done as well, sir,” Lin said, standing from his spot at Lennox’s feet. “I will make your new suit by Sunday.”

“Have it ready by Saturday,” he said and took off his black dress shoes to put on another more comfortable pair.

“Of course, sir.”

Once Edan and Lin were gone, Lennox’s mind went back to the woman that now slept in one of his best rooms.

Lennox wasn’t sure what he wanted or expected of the beautiful, frail thing he’d rescued, or why he’d rescued her at all. The whole point was to kill her, yet she still lived.

When Byron demanded an audience with him nearly a week ago, Lennox had a mind to send the man straight to the debtors’ prison. However, the young man had shouted out his business in the Kingdom Court in the center of Elastria where his palace now stood as a school for children and teens of all ages.

“Witch! I have found a witch,” Byron had shouted, drawing the attention of everyone in attendance.

Smug, Byron knew the gravity of his claim, and had gained what he wanted, just a few moments to speak to the prince—the hunter of the family.

It took only a few moments for Lennox to learn what kind of man Byron was—a disgraceful one that would rather gamble and drink his

girlfriend’s savings away and then turn her in once the money was gone.

He lowered his eyes to the window sill where his hand rested. The red glow of his family ring confirmed that there was indeed a witch within the area.

Lennox rubbed his freshly shaven chin. There was one thing he wanted more than anything.

To be free from his prison.

Maybe that’s why he didn’t let her perish in the storm. A tiny sliver of him hoped that she could end the curse.

He turned away from the window, walking across his wooden floor to the door. Such wishful thinking could be toxic. The odds of this girl being the one his clan had been waiting for were slim.

He put on his shirt, covering the tattoos that covered his entire back and arms—the ink that hid his scars—and looked at himself in the full-length mirror.

Glancing down at the handwritten note Conall had left him about taking care of the castle, Lennox grinned, picked it up and tore it in half. If Conall thought that he could control him, he was sadly mistaken. People seemed to think Lennox was worth saving, despite his evil deeds.

He almost felt sorry for the girl he’d saved. A look in the broken mirror showed otherwise, his wicked grin reflected back.

Who was he kidding?

Prince Lennox knew why he kept her alive—he just wanted to see the little witch suffer.

ALLYN FOLDED HER hands in prayer. It was a habit, though she’d never gotten anything out of it.

She pursed her lips, the rage she’d been keeping at bay on the brink of escaping. She sat in the bathroom with the door locked. Not for her safety. But, for theirs.

Ghosts or not. She’d seen real evil. She knew that whatever had cursed them was nothing compared to what festered within her soul.

Did Prince Lennox know who she was? Was this all a sick game? And then she thought of Conall. Where was he in all of this? Could he speak up

for her and save her from whatever Lennox had in mind?

The entire kingdom knew Lennox to be cruel, a womanizing, rich boy that did whatever he wanted without consequence. Always looking for a fight, his face was splattered on the papers every winter, breaking rules, throwing lavish parties, and defying the king in every way. No one could tame Lennox.

What chance did Allyn have?

“Allyn. Please open the door,” Calinda said from the other side.

“No.” Allyn sat between the porcelain toilet and the claw foot tub, her face buried in her hands.

Calinda showed that waiting behind closed doors was nearly a courtesy and that she could easily glide through them.

Allyn jumped, startled by Calinda’s sudden presence. She rubbed her eyes with her hands and came to her feet.

“You cannot hide in here forever.”

“What is it?” Allyn asked, bitterly. “Is it time for my execution?”

Calinda opened the door and held an arm out toward the bedroom.

“No one has told me about any executions,” Calinda said.

Allyn held out her arms. “So, why am I here?”

Calinda tilted her head. “I can’t say that I am certain, but I have my suspicions.”

“And, those are?”

“I think I’ll keep them to myself until I am certain,” Calinda said. “Now, let’s get you cleaned up and dressed. Prince Lennox wants to properly meet you.”

Allyn stepped aside as a younger female ghost came inside and started running her a bath. She didn’t look at her, going about her business of pouring oils and perfumes into the tub.

“Not too much, Maisie,” Calinda said. “Prince Lennox is sensitive to perfumes.”

Maisie nodded and turned off the water to let it out. “Sorry, mom. We don’t get many girls around here,” she said, finally sneaking a glance at Allyn.

Despite her sadness, Allyn couldn’t help giving the girl a small smile. She realized that though she was a ghost, she looked to be a child of ten at the most, with chin-length brown hair and brown eyes.

Maisie looked confused to see Allyn smiling at her, and her brows furrowed as she looked away and restarted the bath water. Steam started to fill the bathroom.

“Lin dropped off some clothes that are her size,” Maisie said. “I picked out the pretty blue dress since they’ll be dining in the sunroom.”

“Good girl,” Calinda said. She looked to Allyn. “Go on and bathe and put on the dress Maisie picked out for you. I will be waiting outside.”

“Sure. Whatever,” Allyn said, rubbing her eyes.

Calinda began to close the door behind her. “And try not to take too long. Prince Lennox doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Of course he doesn’t,” Allyn said under her breath.

With that, Calinda closed the door and Allyn was left alone again.

She looked to her right at her reflection. For a second she thought she saw her image flicker in the glass, and stepped away from its view.

Eyes wide, Allyn held her breath.

What was that?

CHAPTER 16

WHENEVER ALLYN WAS quiet, the castle seemed to speak to her in hushed tones that vibrated along her bones.

Her heart thumped in her chest as she left her bedroom and walked down the long dark hallway to a double winding staircase that led to the main floor of the castle. The very air of the palace was thick with an eerie cloak of dread and suffering.

Sensitive to such things, Allyn could feel the strife of all who were cursed to be there.

The dark energy was overwhelming, making her sick to feel all of the pain and sadness that had occurred within those walls. There were so many stories that begged to be told, but she shut them out of her mind.

"This is the main floor of Baran Castle," Calinda said, as she led Allyn to the staircase. She paused at the top and pointed to the level above. "Upstairs is where the princes live. Prince Conall lives on in the east wing, and Prince Lennox lives in the west wing. I'd stay away from both wings and keep to your room and the common areas."

Allyn shook her head. She didn't care to venture up there or anywhere else in that castle. If Conall wasn't there, she had no care as to anything within those walls.

Dressed in a blue dress with long sleeves and flat black shoes, Allyn secretly plotted her escape. If Prince Lennox wouldn't see reason and listen to how she knew his brother, she needed a backup plan. She counted the doors of the hallway, glanced at the main door, and noted how many guards were around.

What she couldn’t figure out was how she would get past the ghosts that roamed the halls, completing tasks they’d been doing for centuries as if they still lived. Why did they do it? Why were they working even in death?

At the bottom of the stairs, Calinda stopped her, stepping aside. “We will wait for the prince. He will join us.”

Allyn crossed her arms over her chest as she watched the master walk down the stairs.

Her face was flushed once he emerged from the shadows of the opposite end of the castle from where her room was located.

Captivated, their eyes met, but still cloaked in darkness, she couldn’t see the color until he stepped down and into the light of a grand chandelier that hung above the double staircase. Allyn tensed and she found herself holding her breath as he held her gaze, his blue eyes bright as the purest summer morning.

With white hair that was almost silver and styled much differently from the longer style the men of the kingdom wore, his hair was long on the top, cut short on the sides.

Those eyes.

Dear God, if he doesn’t look just like Conall.

Twins or not, they could have been the same person despite the difference in hair color.

The scowl on her face softened as she looked at him, a glimmer of hope that he would be even a tiny bit like his brother.

She still had yet to draw a breath. Something about him was unsettling, and just as he held her gaze, he broke it once he made it to the bottom of the staircase and turned the corner.

“Come,” he said to Allyn. “We no longer need you, Calinda. I’ll summon you after our meal.”

Calinda bowed and vanished, leaving Allyn feeling cold as she was left alone with the king.

Without another word, he led the rest of the way through the massive castle and its many halls. All of the other servants bowed as he passed them by, and returned to their duties, their expressions solemn and resolute.

Allyn had to quicken her pace as she followed him. She also found herself easily distracted by all that she saw. The paintings of his ancestors

were intriguing. To actually see the original artwork of the Baran clan was remarkable.

All of her life she'd been on a quest for knowledge of history and legends. She lived for a good story, and history had some of the best. She paused at the end when she saw the remaining picture on the wall.

Prince Conall looked down at her, those kind eyes hiding a smile as if the artist that painted him had told a joke.

Where was Prince Lennox's painting?

I guess the black sheep of the family doesn't deserve one.

"Miss Carmody," Prince Lennox called from far down the hallway. Sunlight shone from behind him, breaking up the dim lighting of the otherwise darkened castle, and highlighting the silver of his hair. "Move your ass."

Allyn was surprised that he knew her last name, and taken aback by the harsh tone of his voice.

She lifted her dress' hem to keep from having it drag at her feet and abandoned her spot before the wall that stretched up to the ceiling and the row of portraits that lined it.

Once they made it to the sunroom, Allyn looked to the glass ceiling and all around at the different flowers that lined the wall of windows. The wintry scene was much more beautiful from inside where it was warm. It was almost magical, especially with the vines of roses climbing the window and ceiling.

Two men stood there, waiting in their white uniforms, their ghostly figures translucent just like Calinda's.

Prince Lennox stood at the head of a table set for two and motioned for her to take the seat across from him.

She did so and watched him sit. One of the men put a black cloth across her lap and poured her water. She couldn't help herself, and stared at the prince while he checked his shiny, gold watch.

He sighed as if annoyed and finally looked at her again. When he did so, she quickly looked away. Something about his gaze was too unnerving and stirred something in her that she wasn't used to. She couldn't shake the feeling that Conall looked at her instead of Lennox. It was just her heart wishing it were true.

"You look tense," he said, his voice smooth like velvet. "No one is going to hurt you. Not right now at least."

“Why is that? I thought the point of the witch hunt was to catch us and kill us.”

He sat back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap. “I’m going to make something clear to you. When you got away from me a year ago, I’ve wanted nothing but to watch you burn.”

Allyn sat up. Prince Lennox was the Wolf she escaped in the woods outside of her village. The revelation frightened her. Memories of how big he was in his Wolf form was unsettling. She recalled the fear that filled her as he chased her that night.

“My assistant tells me you and my brother met, and that he wants to let you live.”

“Yes. Conall and I know each other. He is supposed to come for me once winter ends. We are kind of…together.”

Lennox nodded, mocking interest in her story. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding eagerly.

“Oh,” he said. “That’s interesting because I couldn’t care less what Conall wants.”

Allyn leaned forward. “What *do* you want?”

As if her question caught him off guard, his eyes widened for a split second. Then, he cleared his throat and leaned in toward her, so that their faces were almost close enough to touch.

She looked at him, not backing down.

“I’d be happy to glide my tongue along your entire body. You know, while my fingers stroke your sweet spot.”

Lennox licked his full lips and Allyn coiled back. Her face flushed.

He chuckled and sat back in his chair. He rubbed his chin. “Not what you were expecting?”

Allyn picked up her glass of water and drank it down, too embarrassed to look him in the eyes again or reply to his question.

Once brunch was served, Allyn had no appetite. She picked over her steak and eggs while Lennox demolished his. You’d have thought he didn’t have access to the best food in the kingdom by the way he ate.

“Eat up,” he said.

“I’m not hungry.”

He paused and put his fork and knife down. “Eat.”

Allyn’s brows furrowed.

He ate a piece of rare steak. “Suit yourself. I’m taking you to Faustinia and you’ll want to eat before we go. It’s a long flight on a small jet. What size are you, anyway? Can you dance?”

A gasp escaped her lips. “What? We can’t go there. That’s the War Zone.”

“You say this like its news to me.”

Allyn pushed her plate away. “I’m not eating or doing anything until you tell me what is going on. Why am I here?”

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?”

“Well, if my life is in danger, I feel like I have a right to know.” Her cheeks were red. Lennox’s conceit was irritating, to say the least.

He failed to realize who he had sitting before him. The secret was already out. What was to stop her from using her power?

Keep cool, she reminded herself.

“Fair enough,” he said and pushed her plate back to her. “I have some friends I’d like you to meet.”

“Why would I do anything that you want?” She’d reached the end of her patience.

His voice lowered. “I don’t know, *witch*. But, I think your father would want you to do whatever I say.”

Allyn shot to her feet. Her heart sped as she looked down at him, that smug look on his face only angering her more. When he stood, he was a full foot taller than her. He pushed the table away and crossed the space between them.

Chest to chest, he peered down at her. He leaned down to speak right into her ear. “Do you understand who is in charge now?”

Tears fell from her eyes as she stared at his shoulder, his warm breath on her neck.

She nodded. “Yes.”

When he stroked her cheek, she flinched. “Good girl,” he said, with a laugh and stepped away.

Allyn stared ahead as he left the room, her heart thumping in her chest.

How would she get out of this now?

A tear dripped from her chin.

He’d found the one way to really make her his prisoner.

CHAPTER 17

A **SLEEK BLACK JET** awaited Allyn and Prince Lennox that afternoon.

She looked on in wonder as they stood at the top of one of the towers where the jet landed. Prince Lennox stepped out into the snow, like Conall, unaffected by the brutal winds. He walked across the snow-covered rooftop as if he strolled along the beach on a summer day.

Allyn stared in awe as the wind seemed to make way for him, not a single flake of snow landing on his black suit. Allyn, on the other hand, ran from the castle and climbed inside as the wind blew snow into her face.

Once she was inside, she took off her hood and warmed her hands with her breath. There were only two seats in the back of the jet, and when Prince Lennox sat beside her, she folded her hands in her lap and tried to avoid staring at him.

It had been ages since Allyn had been out during the winter curfew. For as long as she could remember, she had watched it pass by from her bedroom window, or from the inside of the convent. She used to count the days until winter ended so that she could be free to play in the woods.

“Tell me something, Allyn,” Lennox said, not bothering to look up from his phone as he seemed to check emails. He sat on the opposite end of her, while an attendant poured whiskey into his glass.

A quick glance down at his phone showed that he had thousands of unread emails. No wonder he couldn’t take his focus off of it. It would take hours to go through them all.

“I’ll tell you anything if you tell me where my father is.”

“He’s somewhere safe. I promise. Nothing will happen to him if you cooperate.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. I will do whatever you ask.”

He grinned, leaning closer to her. “Is that so? *Whatever* I ask?”

She shot him a glare. “Within reason.”

He chuckled. “Fair enough.” He scrolled through his messages, his finger swiping upward on his phone’s screen. “I’ll never forget the first time I shifted in a Wolf. It was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. To revert to something so primal and untamed is liberating. Sometimes I wish I could remain a Wolf at all times.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I prefer being a man. While there are social constraints that come with it, there are also perks. You know, pretty women, football,” he said, and lifted his glass. “Whiskey.”

“You’re a simple man,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“It would appear that way,” he said, taking a drink of his whiskey. “Tell me when you knew you were a witch. What was that like?”

“It wasn’t pleasant,” she told him, closing her eyes against the memory.

“And why is that?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Do I have to remind you of who is in charge? Answer the question, Allyn.

Allyn shot him a glare. “Because my mother died that day. Are you pleased? Are you satisfied?”

That made him look up from his phone. He stared at her, his brows furrowing in what she would have anticipated being horror or judgment. Instead, he looked saddened, his face paling as he watched her scowl at him, her cheeks reddened.

She looked down at her hands. “My power used to be controlled by my emotions. The day she died was the day I lost all control of whatever is inside of me,” she said, her voice lowered to barely above a whisper.

The silence that followed her story left her feeling exposed.

“I had no idea.”

She glanced at Lennox as he put his phone away and met her eyes.

“All I remember of my mother was how she couldn’t even look at me.” He stopped talking and looked away.

“That must have been awful. Why couldn’t she look at you?” Allyn asked, a part of her heart hurting for him.

She couldn’t imagine such a thing. Her mother’s love was half of what shaped her into the woman she was. If Allyn didn’t have a loving mother and father, she was certain that she would have grown into a cold woman, bitter and too weak to fight whatever evil awaited within. Perhaps if Lennox had been shown more love, he’d be a different person.

“How should I know?” Lennox looked at her with an agitated look on his face. “She didn’t like me. Simple as that.” He waved a flippant hand at her and went back to his phone. “Nevermind. Forget I said anything.”

Allyn looked out the window at the clouds. That was clearly a sensitive area for Lennox, and the first glimpse of humanity she’d seen. Maybe there was a tiny crack in his hardened façade, but bringing up their mothers did nothing to improve her mood either.

She hadn’t spoken about her mother in ages. She’d been twelve when she died, and it was an event that changed her life forever. Everything and everyone Allyn had ever loved had either died or left her, and now, all she had left was her father. She had to find out where he was, and get away from Prince Lennox.

First, she needed to survive whatever he had planned for her in the War Zone.

CHAPTER 18

THE WAR ZONE wasn't what Allyn imagined.

The media made it seem as though it was a desolate place where nothing stood but ruins and old decrepit buildings.

Instead, she looked down in awe at domed buildings that housed buildings that looked much like those within the city limits. To think that this thriving city was only a half day south from Elastria was perplexing.

"What is this place?"

"Faustinia. Where the fairies live."

Allyn shot him a look. "Really?" With widened eyes, she peered out the window at the darkened city. History said that the fairies started the war. But, she never believed it. She imagined the fairies had books as well and probably blamed the humans.

Lennox nodded. "You aren't afraid?"

"Why should I be? I have more in common with fairies than I do with humans."

"Good."

"Why is that good?" Allyn asked as the jet landed on a black strip outside of the massive dome. The vibrations of the jet slowed as the engine was shut off.

Lennox stood and reached for her hand. "Because you're my date."

"For what?"

"For the Faustinian Winter Ball. I never miss it. And I'm known to have the most beautiful arm candy."

"Good Lord. I have to be seen with you?"

He laughed—a laugh that was exactly like Conall's—and nodded. "That you do."

She scrunched up her nose, hating that he shared Conall's charming laugh. She accepted his hand as he led her from her seat and to the door.

Outside, the storm raged just as hard as in Elastria, with winds that threatened to lift her from the ground and throw her into the flat wilderness that surrounded them. Prince Lennox held tight to her, seeing her having trouble staying balanced. He wrapped his strong arms around her waist as they waited for a black car to come from the dome and park in front of them.

Allyn only had a few moments to appreciate the warmth of Lennox's body as his chest was pressed to her back, as he stood behind her. They hurried into the car and closed the door against the tirade of fluffy white snow.

Allyn covered her face with her hands, trying to warm her nose which had gone numb from the cold. Without delay, the car turned and drove them toward the dome, and in through the metallic gates which stood several hundred feet high. It didn't look as though the fairies were trying to invade human territory. You'd think that they were trying to protect themselves from the humans.

"Wow," Allyn said.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Lennox asked.

"The fairies have found a way to survive the winter without essentially hibernating and hiding within their homes."

Their domes were amazing, with everything they needed within their glass walls, and completely absent of the snow and heavy winds outside.

"Right. Not everyone is as backward thinking as my father," Lennox said, and for the first time, Allyn saw that he could actually be a reasonable person. When would the Elastrians be able to leave their homes in winter again? It had been far too many years.

She sat back in her seat and looked to Lennox. As much as she hated him, she was secretly grateful that she got to see this magical place where fairies flew through the air. While there were roads, there weren't many cars to be seen. Everyone flew, or walked, happy looks on their shimmering faces.

Allyn couldn't wait to get out of that car and get a closer look at a *real* fairy.

The car pulled into a building, and a metal gate slid down behind them. They parked in an underground parking garage and got out.

Allyn looked around. “This reminds me of the Digital Underground,” she said, rubbing her hands together. It was much more temperate inside the dome than she’d expected. It was warm, actually. Warm enough for a sundress and sandals.

She imagined life here. They’d accept her, right? Open their arms to a sorceress that had no idea where her power came from, *or* the extent of that power.

She tensed when she noticed two men step out of a door that slid up along the wall right beside them.

One had evergreen hair, the other had red. They were the same height, much taller than she imagined a fairy to be. At nearly a foot taller than her, they towered over her, their smooth, shimmering dark brown faces making them look like young men just out of their teen years. You could never be sure of the age of a fairy.

At least, that’s what Allyn had read.

They didn’t smile at Prince Lennox. Instead, they glared at him, as if he wasn’t welcome.

“Ivan. Igor. Aren’t you going to say hello to me and my lovely date?” Lennox said, motioning toward Allyn.

Ivan and Igor looked down at her, their blue eyes blinking with two sets of eyelids. Allyn shivered. They’d pretty much resembled dark-skinned humans covered in silver glitter until they did that with their eyes.

“We told you never to come back here after what you did last winter?” Ivan—the one with the green hair—said. He straightened his tie and cleared his throat. “My parents still haven’t forgiven me for letting you come.”

Lennox clasped a hand over their shoulders. “Listen, we’re practically brothers. Let me talk to Svetlana and Anton. I’ll apologize. We’ll all be a family again.”

Igor shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“We will talk inside,” Ivan said, glancing at Allyn. “Such matters shouldn’t be discussed in front of women.”

Igor and Allyn caught glances and he smiled. “I like your hair,” he said with a wink.

Allyn's smile came easily as she eyes his. They had the same shade. "Thank you," she said. "Sure we aren't related?"

He chuckled and looked to Lennox. "I like this one. You did well this time."

With that, Allyn and Lennox followed behind, Lennox whispering something to Ivan as they stepped inside the sliding door and into a small room with mirrors for walls.

Allyn lost her balance when the floor shot them upward at a speed that she hadn't expected.

"Whoa. Whoa," Lennox said, grabbing hold of her. He held her steady as the room went higher and higher.

It was over in seconds, and Allyn was dizzy once the strange elevator stopped.

"Okay, there?" Lennox asked, not letting go until Allyn nodded.

She pushed his hand off of her waist and put her hand to her forehead as she waited for the room to stop spinning.

"I'm fine," she said, catching her breath. "You could have warned me."

"I didn't know you were such a delicate flower." He snickered. "Its just an elevator."

Allyn glared at him as the door opened to a hallway much like those in the Digital Underground. Ancient fairy dialect stretched along the dark walls, illuminated by neon lights.

"The ball starts soon," Ivan said. "Why don't you take the girl to one of the guest rooms, Igor. I'll take Lennox to ma and pa and see if he can sweet talk his way out of all of the trouble he's in."

"I can't wait to hear how that goes," Igor said. He looked to Allyn, giving her a smug smile. "But, being the pretty ladie's guide sounds like much more fun. This way, miss."

For the first time, Allyn wasn't sure if she wanted to separate from Prince Lennox. They were in a strange place, with people that she didn't know, customs that she was unaware of. She hesitated and Lennox noticed. He grinned, amused.

"Hey," Lennox said to her, leaning close to her ear. "I won't be far."

She frowned, hating that he read her hesitation so accurately. He gave her a smack on the bottom and she jumped, glaring at him from over her shoulder.

Without a word, she followed Igor down the hallway to a bedroom. He opened the door for her and waited for her to go inside. “You can get ready here. I’m sure Lennox will smooth things over with my parents and you two will be able to celebrate the end of autumn with us.”

Allyn looked around at the simple room. There was a bed on the floor, with black covers designed with beautiful white flowers folded halfway down. A clear washbasin was on the vanity, and there was one black chair beside a burning flower with red petals.

Intrigued by the flower, she walked directly to it. Instinct told her that the flames wouldn’t harm her, so she stuck her hand in the flames and smiled as they turned from orange to blue.

“What did Lennox do?” she asked. When she looked over her shoulder at Igor he stared at her with his mouth open, his eyes wide.

Instead of answering her question, his eyes lifted to hers. “What are you?”

Allyn looked down at her hand, seeing that the blue flames clung to her like lint. She shook her hand and the flames vanished. She tucked her hands into her jacket pocket.

“I’m sorry,” was all she could think to say. She was sure her cheeks were blood red as she stood there, awkwardly, wishing she could shrink into a speck of dust and float away.

Igor didn’t say anything else to her. He simply cleared his throat and backed out of the room and closed the door.

Allyn squeezed her eyes closed and groaned. “Good job fitting in.”

CHAPTER 19

MY FATHER IS missing, and I am about to go to a party.

Great.

Allyn looked at herself in the full-length mirror with a sigh. She didn't even care that her maroon ball gown was the most stunning thing she'd ever worn.

She looked like a princess. With fake, silver fairy wings attached to her back, she could have passed for one of the girls in the fairy tales she loved to read as a little girl. A stylist had styled her hair so that it wouldn't get in the way of her shiny new wings.

"What am I doing?" she asked herself.

A knock on her door broke her from her thoughts. She sighed. This was the most beautiful she'd ever been, and she couldn't enjoy it for the worry in her belly.

All she could think of was her father perishing in a dungeon somewhere.

She squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled. "You can do this. Play the part. Get the information. Save your father."

With that, she opened her eyes, resolute.

She opened the door and rolled her eyes at Prince Lennox.

Sure, he looked amazing, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but her mission.

He wore a black suit that was a contrast to his perfect silvery-white hair. Why did he have to look so good? It made it hard to truly hate him. Especially since he looked just like Conall. He even had the same smile, and when he grinned at her, her heart couldn't help but skip a beat.

“Well, look at you,” Lennox said, leaning against the doorframe. “You fill that dress out better than I’d imagined.”

She ignored his comment, and how his gaze lingered on her full bosom. She put her hands on her slim waist and rolled her eyes.

“Did you resolve whatever issue you had with Ivan and Igor’s parents?”

“Who?” He lifted a brow. “Oh, right. The king and queen of Faustinia. Yeah. We’re good.”

Allyn gulped. Of course, they were in the fairy palace. Why did she expect any less?

“Well, come on. Let’s make our appearance. Dinner, dancing, a little debauchery. I hope you’re ready.”

Allyn put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

“What do they know about me?”

Lennox checked his silver watch. “That you’re a witch. Enough with the questions. Let’s go.”

Without another word, he turned his back on her and led the way down the hall.

“You could have told them that I’m your prisoner,” she said under her breath. Could a fairy be an ally? Could anyone help her?

The thought of pulling Igor aside crossed her mind and faded. She was in a foreign country. She didn’t stand a chance. Best to keep quiet and calm until she and Prince Lennox returned to Elastria.

As if by invisible chains, Lennox pulled her along through the fairy palace where the staff and other guests stared at the two humans like they were flying fish.

They made their way to the banquet room where everyone gathered with their drinks and socialized while the long table set with the colorful centerpieces of flowers Allyn had never seen.

Prince Lennox put his hand on the small of her back. “Try not to catch any fairy dude’s eye while I get us a drink. Deal?”

Allyn didn’t have a chance to reply as he left her to go to the bar in the center of the large room with chandeliers that resembled blue icicles.

Self-conscious, Allyn’s face started to flush as she noticed that the majority of fairies in the room were staring at her. They were the ones hovering above the ground, with their winds flapping like hummingbirds, but she was the most interesting person in the room.

A witch in a maroon dress, with an arrogant prince that could shift into a Wolf.

The whispers didn't take long to start, itching her ears as she caught some of what was said.

At least they weren't speaking ill of her. Apparently, magic wasn't frowned upon here the way it was in Elastria.

Hope that they'd accept her dared to rise within her belly.

A woman flew over to her, her crystal shoes barely touching the flood. With bright lavender hair that was pinned up in a style that resembled a pineapple, she had the most intriguing coffee-colored skin that shimmered like tiny diamonds had been crushed and dusted onto her.

Two other women were close behind, their white hair flowing long behind them and their elaborate gowns.

"Hello there," the one with the lavender hair said, a smile on her full lips. She tilted her head as she looked Allyn up and down with large gray eyes.

Allyn swallowed. Don't be awkward. She forced a smile. "Hello.

"I'm Laxmi. These are my sisters, Sonali and Richa."

"Nice to meet you," Allyn said, nodding to Laxmi's sisters that stood so close that she could smell their floral perfume, and the way the cool wind whenever they flapped their smaller translucent wings.

Allyn noticed how Laxmi's were much bigger and fuller. She wondered what that was about.

"So," Laxmi said, leaning close to Allyn. "Tell us. Are you really a witch? Prince Lennox can be a bit of a—"

"Liar," Sonali and Richa said in unison.

"Storyteller," Laxmi corrected.

Allyn didn't know how to answer that question. Witch was such an odd term for her. She'd never cast a spell in her life. She'd never read a spell book, or conjured hexes. Her power was innate, and…different.

"I guess you can say that," Allyn said. "Yeah, I'm the witch."

"Well, that is refreshing," Laxmi said. "You know that witches come here often for sanctuary, right?"

Allyn's interest spiked. Her brows lifted. "Really?"

"Yes, but they can't stay here. They use Faustinia as a half-way point, and pass on through to the Americas. Since we face the sea, they hop on a ship and continue their journey."

Allyn stared at Laxmi, desperate to ask her how she could do the same. But, she couldn't leave her father behind. So, she kept her pleas to herself and tensed as Lennox returned.

His perfect white teeth gleamed as he smiled at the three fairy women. "Ladies," he said, and handed Allyn a glass of wine.

Drinking it down, Allyn watched the expressions on Richa and Sonali's faces darken.

Laxmi stood before Lennox, as if shielding the others. "Don't speak to us," she said and motioned to the other two. "Until you apologize to my sisters for what you did last year."

Lennox feigned ignorance and drank from a short glass filled half-way with what looked like whiskey.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," Lennox said, his brows lifted. "Why don't you refresh my memory?"

Richa slapped him, the sound reverberating through the entire room. Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to look at the scene. When Sonali did the same, Allyn almost burst out laughing, but covered her mouth instead.

Whatever Lennox did, she was sure he deserved it.

Instead of getting angry, Lennox grinned. "Oh, yes," he said. "I remember now. I am sorry for fucking your sisters and not calling them. How's that?" he asked Laxmi who growled in annoyance and turned to her sisters.

"Let's go," she said. Her eyes shot to Allyn for a brief moment with a look of pity, and they flew away.

Allyn wished they would have stayed and kept her company, but she couldn't blame them for not wanting to hang around Prince Lennox.

"I wonder when they'll get over it," Lennox said before taking another sip of his drink.

"It's appalling how little you know about human emotion."

Lennox shrugged. "Why should I? I'm not human." He lowered his voice as if he was about to tell her a secret. "I'm a beast."

With that, he took her hand and led her into the crowd.

Allyn inhaled and said a tiny prayer as she followed him. *Let me get through this*.

There were many difficult situations in her life that she'd survived; bullying all through her school years, her mother's death, beatings and

glorified torture from the hands of the nuns, betrayal from the man she loved. What was a night pretending to be her captors date?

She could get through this. With poise.

When he led her to an older fairy couple, she immediately knew who they were.

“Allyn,” Lennox said. “Meet the king and queen of Faustinia.”

Allyn smiled at them, and gave an awkward little curtsy that made her cheeks turn rose red.

“Lovely to meet you,” she said.

The queen didn’t smile, but nodded without a word.

The king, as tall as Lennox, with white hair and eyes that were gray like Laxmi’s, smiled at her. “Likewise,” he said. “What do you do back in Elastria?”

Great. Let’s show them how much of a loser I am. What should I tell them? Waitress? Unemployed waitress? What lovely options.

“She’s a famed novelist,” Lennox said.

The king and queen both seemed intrigued by that reply.

“Is that so?” the queen asked.

Stunned by his response, she swallowed, faked a smile and nodded. “It is,” Allyn said. “I’ve always enjoyed writing.”

That—at least—wasn’t a lie. She’d gone to college for literature, and had written several stories. She’d never been published though. But, the fact that Lennox lied for her was a bit astounding. And to lie that Allyn was exactly what she dreamed to be was even more surprising.

“Well, that is incredible. Well done for someone so young,” the king said,

The queen put a hand on the king’s chest. “We should start the banquet now.”

He nodded. “Right. Lovely to meet you, Allyn. You two stay out of trouble,” he said, directing that last part to Lennox with a stern look.

Allyn now knew why they were so angry at Lennox. He’d slept with their daughters and ran back to Elastria. Her father would have been upset too—any father for that matter.

“You like that?” Lennox said, once the king and queen walked away.

“Like what?” Allyn asked, her stomach growling as the scent of food being brought into the room catching her attention.

“How I just elevated you in their eyes? Amazing what a little lying can do.”

Allyn pursed her lips as she followed him to their seats.

He had to rub it in that it was a lie. She wondered if she’d ever survive her ordeal to make it a truth.

Once they sat down at the table, Lennox gave her thigh a squeeze and ordered them more drinks.

As Allyn sat there, she stared at the centerpiece before her. A black tree wrapped in crystals and white flowers. All went quiet inside her head as she stared at it, until it started to bleed. Dark crimson blood left the creases of the tree’s bark and spilled onto the white table like a river.

Shocked, Allyn was broken from her trance and blinked.

Nothing.

There was no blood, and everyone continued to chat and go on as if nothing happened.

Her heart thumped in her chest as she clutched Lennox’s hand, thankful that she had something to grip, even if it was the hand of the man she should hate.

CHAPTER 20

DINNER ENDED AND everyone left the banquet hall to join the other guests for the ball.

Surprisingly, Lennox hadn't been as vulgar as she thought he would be. He ate. He drank. He told terrible jokes. But, other than that, he wasn't awful to be around.

They reached the center of the circular palace where the party was held and being around a whole new slew of guests made Allyn anxious. Too many cocktails and sugar made her adrenaline spike.

Her full belly churned and she had to avert her eyes from everyone that they passed on their way to the main ballroom.

Prince Lennox, however…

He soaked up the attention as if it was his driving force.

No wonder he was always on the front of the imperial papers every winter, getting into trouble, or in the middle of some scandal.

He outstretched his arms when they reached the main balcony that stood between two staircases that led to the dance floor.

Allyn lingered a few feet behind, wringing her hands with worry. She felt ill. She wasn't prepared for this kind of attention. Despite the loud music that played, she could hear her own heartbeat thumping in her chest. She pressed her back against the wall.

I can't do this.

She couldn't even appreciate the beauty of the ballroom, with its golden chandeliers, and colorful streamers hanging from the ceiling with white lights along the fabric.

Everyone was so attractive. Their faces were smooth, without age, and like dolls. Every beat of the music sent her closer to losing it. She stepped backward, into the shadows of the corridor, hoping Lennox wouldn't notice.

After a few minutes of adjusting to the setting, Igor approached. He handed her a drink as Lennox talked to a group of female fairies that seemed to pounce on the chance to get him alone.

Allyn drank it down, watching Lennox charm the group of women. Her throat burned at whatever she'd just swallowed.

She grimaced. "What was that?"

He smiled, his face shimmering in the dim red light coming from the chandelier above. For a fairy, he was handsome. Too sparkly to be her type, but nice to look at, and with each passing second, her body warmed more and more with the strange liquor.

Igor shrugged. "It's just the special punch we serve at each party. We're kind of known for it. They don't have it in Elastria."

The flavor was pleasant, like tropical fruit, but it made her feel drunk way too fast.

"So, I saw what you did earlier. I didn't know witches were impervious to fire. How did you do that?"

Allyn shrugged. "I don't know." She really didn't.

"Well, it was pretty cool," Igor said.

"Thanks."

"Tell me something, Allyn. What's the real deal between you two? Are you really his date?"

"Why do you ask?"

Igor grinned. "You're a pretty girl. Do I really have to spell it out for you?"

Allyn frowned and glanced at him. "Lennox would break you in half if he thought you were flirting with me."

"Nonsense. Lennox doesn't feel anything for any girl. He comes here almost every winter and brings women with him every time. You think he cares about them? I've seen how he treats girls."

That revelation wasn't very assuring.

"But, what I don't understand is this dynamic between you to. I mean…he's a hunter and hunts witches. Do you know how many he's killed?"

Allyn looked away. Why did he have to remind her?

As if Lennox read her mind or sensed her anxiety, he turned to her, his brows raised, questioningly.

Allyn's face flushed and she stepped away from Igor, who was too close for her comfort.

When Lennox approached, she wasn't sure what to expect. She wanted to cower away, as his shadow seemed to swallow her the closer he got.

Instead of yelling at her, Lennox took her hand, ignoring Igor's presence, and led her away from the crowds.

In tears, she followed behind him. She'd dreamed of a night like this for all of her life. A ball, fairies, a prince. Why did she feel as though her head was going to explode?

She wished she hadn't drunk whatever Igor gave her.

Where was Conall? Why couldn't she share this moment with him?

Far from the ball, Lennox led her to a door that led outside. No one was around on the veranda that overlooked a rushing river that glowed like diamonds beneath the moonlight the spilled into the doom through the glass.

Allyn sniffled and wiped her face. She couldn't look Lennox in the eye as he turned to her. Just a glance revealed how angry he was.

She'd ruined his night to exploit her.

"What?" she asked, turning her back to him. "Go on. Say what's on your mind."

When he didn't reply, she covered her face and sobbed into her hands.

Allyn glanced back to see Lennox sit down on one of the black, wire, and benches.

He let her cry, and she was surprisingly appreciative of that moment to just let it out.

"Come here, Allyn," he said, his voice firm but not angry.

"Why?"

"Because I told you to."

She exhaled and turned to him, closing the space between them. She stood right before him, her legs touching his knees, and faced him. "What do you want from me, Lennox?"

"I want you to be by my side. That is all."

Perplexed, Allyn's eyes narrowed. What was he trying to prove? Did he need the world to know that he captured the one witch that escaped, and

parade her around like a prize?

“Conall gets everything. For once, I want to win.”

“You can’t win me.”

“But, I will,” he said, softly, a half smirk on his lips.

“I can’t do this.”

“Do what? All I asked was for you to join me tonight. I didn’t ask you to strip for my friends or lick liquor off another girl like the other girls I’ve brought out into the public. Not once have I tried to embarrass, humiliate or exploit you.”

Allyn frowned. “You actually made girls do those things.”

He smirked. “I’ve never had to *make* anyone do anything. Girls usually break their necks to get a chance to please me.”

“I see. I’m your first slave then.”

He grimaced, as though genuinely disgusted by what she’d said.

“I wouldn’t call you that. *Seriously*, Allyn. You’re so dramatic.”

“That’s what I am, though.”

He took her by the waist and moved her from before him. He stood, towering over her. “No, Allyn. I hunted you, and I captured you. You aren’t my slave. You are my prey. And if you don’t get in line, you’ll be my dinner. I will eat every last of your bones, and you will be forgotten. Just another witch. Exterminated.”

Those words stung…more than she thought they could. She let herself forget that he could rip her throat out at any moment.

“You better make up your mind, Lennox. Am I your prey? Or are you trying to seduce me? You’d better make a decision.”

He searched her eyes, and she could tell he was holding himself back from saying something.

“No one said anything about wanting to seduce you. You better get in line or you’ll be tossed back into the slums with that boyfriend that sold you to me.”

Mention of Byron sent her over the edge. Her cheeks burned red.

She balled her fists, seething, her eyes narrowed as she watched him walk away.

“Take me to my father,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’m not asking.”

Lennox turned to her. “We leave when I am ready. You’re lucky, Allyn. Don’t push it.”

“No, Lennox. You’re lucky.”

Allyn raised her hands, her fingers outstretched as her power was released. It was euphoric, her body cooling as the red bands encircled her.

Lennox took a step back, his eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

Allyn tilted her chin. “I’ll start another world war if you don’t take me to my father. Right now.”

She hated to make such a threat, but threats were all that Lennox probably understood. He couldn’t be reasoned with.

To her bewilderment, he clenched his jaw and walked right up to her.

“Go on,” he said, his forehead pressed to hers. “*Do it*.”

Allyn’s resolve faltered. She was stuck in his gaze, unable to move or think.

He took her face into his hands and held her.

Allyn’s chest heaved at how close he was to her. She was sure he was going to kiss her and licked her lips.

His thumb stroked her cheek, and she closed her eyes.

Did she *want* Lennox to kiss her? He was nothing like Conall, the man she knew she wanted.

His lips pressed to hers, and an electric shot zapped into her body, jolting her awake.

He snatched his hands away, his eyes wide.

He felt it too.

Lennox backed away, putting his hands in his pockets.

“Come on,” he said, his brows furrowed as he turned around. “We’re going back. Fucking waste of time.”

Allyn stood there for a moment, completely confused by what just happened. She forced her legs forward, ready to get one step closer to finding her father, and as far away from Prince Lennox as she could.

If that shock wasn’t warning enough, she’d be stupid not to listen.

CHAPTER 21

IT WAS DAWN the next day when Allyn and Prince Lennox returned to Elastira.

They hadn't spoken the entire flight, and Allyn had tried to sleep, but her body was too full of adrenaline to let her.

Once they landed on the tower of Baran Castle, Lennox jumped from the jet before the engine even stopped. He didn't bother speaking to Allyn and vanished inside the tower's doors.

Like a child, he refused to speak to her, and treated her as if she didn't exist. His kiss lingered in her mind and wouldn't fade. It was all that she could think about.

That, and how she would rescue her father.

Robert Carmody didn't deserve all of the suffering she'd brought to his life.

Allyn sat in the back of the jet, half-inclined to ask the man driving the plane to take her far away. Once the engine stopped, she had no choice but to leave and step onto the icy rooftop.

She stood there as the jet flew away, her hair flying in the wind. In a ball gown, she considered jumping over the edge of the roof. What was the worst that could happen? Nothing in her life was right.

Would Lennox let her father go if she no longer lived?

ON THE OPPOSITE end from Conall's side of the castle, Lennox's quarters were completely un-renovated. The raw, gothic style of the original design was what appealed to him. It wasn't a secret that Conall and Lennox were completely different.

For once, Lennox wished that Conall was there…to help him sort out the strange attraction he felt pulling him to the witch.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. He'd searched for her for what felt like his entire life.

The one witch that descended from the one that cursed his clan. He thought that he had it all figured out, but everything he touched was always left ruined.

The night he'd sniffed her out of the crowd and chased her down had been an eye-opening experience. Hunting was his skill, and to have her escape enraged him.

Now, he had her.

He'd kissed her.

Why was she still alive? What game had he found himself playing?

Lennox paused before the large mirror on his wall between his bed and wardrobe, cracks along the glass that distorted his reflection.

"Tell me, Conall. Will you be upset if I sleep with her? Will you be jealous of *me* for once?"

His grin widened as he looked at himself in the broken mirror. Despite his grin, he hated his reflection. He hated who he was.

He put his hands on either side of the mirror and closed his eyes.

"I'll try not to ruin her for you," he whispered and turned away to face the mess of his room. He slept on a mattress on the floor beside his broken bed. There were clothes strewn about the floor and glass from the lamps and antiques he'd broken during his latest blowup.

What he really needed was a hunt, but his ultimate prey was already within his grasp.

Perhaps he could approach her a different way, and sate his *other* carnal desires.

Lennox shot a glare toward his doorway.

"Who told you that you could come in?"

Calinda manifested before him, her cloudy white eyes looking deep into his soul.

"The girl," she said.

Lennox shrugged. “What about her?”

Calinda faded back into the air, her voice surrounding him. “She’s getting away.”

Lennox tensed as he stood there. He balled his fists and looked at the broken mirror once last time.

“Not this time,” he said and stormed to his balcony.

He pulled his sweater over his head, snow falling all around him, but not touching his flesh. A grin came to his lips when he sniffed the air, picking up her scent. She could have run miles in any direction and he would have picked up her scent. Luckily, she was nowhere near miles away. He focused his attention ahead and caught a hint of red in the distance.

There.

He had her.

With a leap over the railing, he shifted into the form he trusted best.

A Wolf.

CHAPTER 22

ALLYN RAN THROUGH the woods, her heels slamming into ice-packed dirt and snow.

She didn't care that they hurt her feet, or that the cold tore into her flesh and chilled her bones. She was not going to be anyone's prisoner.

Spending six years in the convent was enough to make her fight for her freedom. Even though she wasn't shackled and forced to sleep in the bottom of a dry well, her freedom was something she'd never give away easily.

Not again.

Never again, she growled through clenched teeth.

Allyn had one goal: find her father, and no one was going to stop her.

The wind was against her, blowing into her face and pushing her back. This day seemed to mark the eve of when she'd gotten away from Lennox the first time. With her power on her side, he couldn't touch her.

She raced through the trees, lines and rows of birch trees making a path far from the castle. Her only fear was that she had no idea where she was going and that the snow betrayed her path. Her only hope was that she was faster than the Wolf.

A howl resounded through the woods, sending chills up her spine. Her lead was ruined. Lennox was close behind.

Allyn pumped her arms, and quickened her speed, but the sound of Lennox's feet pounding on the ground frightened her. He was much faster than last time.

His growl seemed to come from right behind her.

This might have been a mistake.

The space between them was too small to use her power. If she risked a split second to face him, she was dead.

She fought to catch her breath as the wind increased ten-fold, pushing her back. She screamed and tried to jump through a tunnel of wind and snow.

Instead of going airborne, her body was pulled back as strong arms wrapped around her from behind and brought her down. Allyn's scream filled the woods as Lennox slammed her into the ground and pinned her.

She gasped for air as her head and body sunk into the cold snow. Instead of facing the Wolf, Allyn found herself pinned by Prince Lennox's human form, his naked body on top of hers, warming her and shielding her from the cold.

How it was possible, she had no clue. As the storm raged around them, he protected her, cradling her face in his arms, holding her hands down by lacing his fingers through hers.

"Let me go," she pleaded, tears streaming from her eyes.

When he looked down at her, Allyn sucked in a breath. Fear filled her eyes and she couldn't make sense of what she saw.

"Conall?" she whispered, her eyes widening as he looked into her eyes.

Icy blue eyes, clouded by tears, met hers. She ripped her hand free from his and touched his hair. Black as a raven.

He squeezed his eyes closed and cried out as if in pain.

Confused, but moved by his pain, she touched his face. "What is it? How did you get here?" She turned her head to look for Lennox, who was nowhere to be found, all the while the funnel encircled them like a snowy tornado.

When his eyes opened again, he growled at her. She screamed, terrified by what she saw in his eyes. Was it the evil within her that she saw reflected in him?

Or something else?

It seemed to physically hurt him to lean down to her and press his cheek to hers.

"If you hurt her, I will end us both," Conall said into the wind.

Allyn froze, every muscle in her body tensing beneath him.

Her chest heaved as realization slammed into her, making her feel ill. What kind of dark magic was this? She'd never seen or heard of anything

like it.

“Conall?” she called, her voice small like a little girl’s.

He didn’t reply.

Instead, when he pulled up, Lennox faced her, white hair, and wild eyes.

“No, love,” Lennox said, grabbing a handful of her hair and pulling her to her feet. “Conall’s been sent back to time out.”

Allyn was wrong. Her power was no match for this sorcery.

As Lennox pulled her through the snow by her hair, she went limp.

Her suspicions were confirmed, and it broke her heart into a million tiny pieces that she feared would never be put together.

Conall and Lennox were the same person.

And she was *seriously* screwed.

CHAPTER 23

"**LET ME TELL** you a secret," the voice at the bottom of the well whispered into the dark when Allyn was just a little girl.

On the fifth night of Allyn's solitude at the convent, something presented itself to her, a voice. She couldn't tell if it was a male or female, but it sounded to her more like a child.

She never thought she'd actually want to return to the inside of those convent walls. But this…having to sleep at on the ground, with stone walls surrounding her and stretching at least sixty feet above.

She had tried to ignore the voice in the dark, having heard various voices throughout her life. This one wouldn't shut up, and grated on her nerves as she curled into a ball and looked up at the moon above.

Bored, and lonely, Allyn finally replied to the curious entity that shared her space.

"Go on. Tell me the secret."

"Are you sure you're ready?"

Allyn stared at the moon, wishing she could fly far far away.

"I am."

"Once upon a time, there was a girl."

"I know this story already," Allyn said. If there was ever a once upon a time tale, Allyn had read it. Back at home, she had rows of shelves that her father made with books from all over the world.

"You do not. This story has never been told."

Rolling her eyes, she sighed and pressed her cheek to the cool dirt. "Go on then. Tell me this new story."

"The girl looked just like you. And she had her bones eaten by a wolf."

Allyn sat up, her eyes darting around her. The pounding of her heart within her chest filled her ears as she strained to catch a glimpse of what spoke to her. “Who are you?”

Laughter came from all around her and Allyn covered her ears.

“No more stories,” Allyn shouted. “Go away!”

The laughter only got louder, and louder.

Allyn shot to her feet, her cheeks reddened, her eyes narrowed. She held her hands out in the shape of a triangle. Red bands escaping her palms like blood.

“LEAVE!” Her voice boomed throughout the well. The ground and walls shook, and she gritted her teeth as the bands of power swirled around her like a tornado of blood.

The laughter ceased, and Allyn was left in peace.

Exhausted, she crumbled into a ball on the floor and cried into the night. When the sun rose that next morning, she woke up to red writing all over the stone walls.

She’d never forget the three phrases that she read and traced with her fingers.

I’m sorry.

I’m sorry.

I just had to warn you.

Tame the wolf.

Tame the wolf.

TAME THE WOLF.

CHAPTER 24

TAME THE WOLF.

Those three words kept replaying inside Allyn's head as she waited in silence for her eyes to adjust to the darkness of Baran Castle's dungeon. She couldn't remember what was real and what was a dream anymore. So, she was left numb, the sting of Lennox's fingers on her flesh all she could feel.

Prince Lennox had shoved her in there and locked her in. Though Calinda had brought her a blanket and warm tea, she was still in a state of shock.

Conall.

Wrapped in the blanket, Allyn curled in the corner of the ancient cell, her eyes fixed on the large iron door just outside her bars.

Trying to escape was the best thing she could have done. If she hadn't, she might not have discovered the real curse of the Baran clan. It all made sense as she pieced together the puzzle. Even when she stayed at the palace as a child that fateful weekend, she'd been curious to see Lennox, who was always away.

Lennox and Conall had never been spotted in the same place at the same time. Ever.

She sighed.

Was it worth dealing with Lennox to get to Conall? One weekend as children and a few nights as an adult was a stretch for building a real connection. But, what she felt had been real—more real than anything she'd felt with another man.

She pounded her fist into the stone floor. Just when she thought she was finally getting some luck, this craziness had to enter her life and make it that much more difficult and confusing.

But, that brief moment seeing Conall had rocked her to her core. Conall had emerged to save her. Wasn't that proof enough?

She could only imagine the suffering he must have gone through to share a body with Lennox, his darker side. She shook her head. How did she even know which of them was the real prince?

She covered her mouth. *Dear Lord.* It was her mission to find out.

So many questions filled her mind as she pulled her blanket closer and laid her head down. Exhaustion didn't begin to describe her level of fatigue. Her head lolled to the side as a ghost of a guard walked past her cell.

Dressed in ancient armor, he carried a pike that kept dragging along the stone floor.

Allyn groaned and turned the other way. Any other girl would have cowered in fear at the hollow look in the ghosts eyes. All Allyn could think of was how she was ever going to get some sleep with that annoying sound?

The dungeon door opened, a creaking sound alerting Allyn. She sat up and looked over her shoulder.

Lennox stepped through the door, dressed in a plain gray long-sleeved shirt and black jeans. His hair was wet and slicked back. He carried a candle with him, shedding soft light on the space. He paced before her cell in silence as her eyes followed him.

"So," he said, pausing before the bars. He knelt down and folded his hands while nodding his head. "You're the first person to learn the truth of my curse. I admit, I never thought you'd figure it out. I'd hoped to learn your secrets first."

"What do you want to know, Lennox?"

The softness of her voice must have caught him off guard. Her willingness to open up to him caused him to pause. He rubbed his chin as if in thought.

"What are you?"

Allyn shook her head. "I wish I knew."

He continued pacing the room. "You're not just any witch, are you?"

"I don't think so. The nuns say that I'm cursed."

“Fuck off. You don’t know anything about curses.”

Allyn shrugged off her blanket and showed him her hands. The candle flickered as she showed him what coursed through her veins. Red flames intertwined with orange and gold slowly seeped from her palms, dancing like the light of the candle. The power glowed, illuminating her face and the green of her eyes.

“Tell me what this is then. Why do I hear voices in the dark?” She scratched her skin, tears pooling in her eyes and he seemed awestruck by what he saw before him. “Why can’t I scratch the incessant itch within? Tell me, Lennox. Are we *that* different?”

She watched him swallow and lick his lips. A flicker of fear crossed his expression and she slumped to the ground, the blood-colored power soaking back into her skin.

“What am I going to do with you now?”

Allyn crawled to him, her face an inch from the bars as she peered at him from the darkness.

“Tell me where my father is,” she whispered.

Lennox moved closer, his face free of any emotion. “No.”

She wiped her eyes. “I only asked as a courtesy. You can’t keep me here. And, I will find him.”

He thumped the bars with his fingers. “You’re the one behind bars, love.”

Allyn grabbed the bars and they turned red. The once cool iron heated until steam emitted from its surface. Her lips parted as all of her energy rushed forth from her palms until the bars melted and dissipated like ash.

Lennox shot to his feet. “Clever girl.”

“You can’t keep me here against my will,” she said.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, because you don’t have to. I will stay willingly, but you must tell me where my father is.”

He blinked. “You’ll stay?”

Allyn slowly came to her feet and nodded. “Just promise not to harm my father, and I promise to stay.”

Her dress was still wet and clung to her body. As his eyes looked her over, she stepped over the boundary of her cell and the rest of the dungeon. She took Lennox’s face into her hands and he tensed at her touch. For the

first time, it was him that was afraid to look at her in the eye. She wondered when was the last time he'd felt a tender touch.

"You better not be putting a spell on me."

She shook her head. "No," she said and leaned up to kiss him on the lips. The same electricity she'd felt with Conall was there, and she breathed him in, her tongue entering his mouth and gliding along his. "I'm simply showing you who really is in charge."

His eyes widened as she pushed him against the wall and wrapped her arms around his neck. Lennox held her by the waist, and she could tell he was conflicted by desire and the impulse to run from her. Instead of running, he kissed her back, greedily. With a firm hold of her hair, he tilted her head back and kissed her throat. His other hand lifted her damp dress up to her waist and he gripped her by her buttocks, pressing her pelvis to his.

Allyn's mind was clouded by images of his naked body on top of her. She'd exposed herself to this man in a way she'd never done before. But, it was too soon. Not like this—not in a dark and damp dungeon.

There were still truths to be told, and she couldn't let him win her body too easily.

When she pulled away, he gave her a wary gaze. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked her, breathless, his icy-blue eyes lingering on her heaving bosom.

Her brows furrowed as it came to her. Why she was there. She licked her lips. She put her hands on his cheeks. "I think I'm here to cure you."

His hands shot to hers and he wrapped his fingers around her wrists. "I don't need to be cured."

Though he spoke those words, his eyes softened to her as she pressed her cheek to his chest and listened to how his heartbeat quickened.

"You can't hide the truth from me," Allyn said. "I can read what's written on your heart. And your heart wants me as much as I want you."

He shoved her away. "Enough. You know nothing about me."

"I know why you can't bring yourself to kill me."

From the way his chest heaved, and his cheeks flushed, she knew she was right.

She kept her distance as he glared at her. Despite his resistance, Allyn knew what she had to do.

Tame the beast.

She had to make both sides of the prince fall for her.
Allyn was up for the challenge.

CHAPTER 25

"**GET OUT OF** my sight," Lennox said, opening the door to the dungeon.

He couldn't let her see him that way. Vulnerable and completely caught off guard.

Why did Conall have to ruin things by showing his face?

This was his moment.

Allyn stood there, watching him. He wanted to grab her and rip off her already tattered dress. Visions of taking her on the grimy floor of the dungeon heated him from the inside. He licked his lips, panting at the very scent of her. A glance over his shoulder revealed that she still stood there, not budging.

As much as he wanted to fuck her right there, she was too pretty and special to be ravished on the floor.

Allyn nodded. "Whatever you say."

She walked past him, hand brushing his as she passed by.

Lennox flinched. The desire was too strong. He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back.

She gasped as he pressed her pelvis to his hardened manhood and kissed her.

She didn't resist. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and submitted.

Lennox lifted her by her thighs and pressed her back against the cold dungeon wall. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he took cupped her butt, his tongue feasting on hers.

She tasted more delicious than he'd imagined. Her scent was intoxicating. His wolf senses were overwhelmed by it. All he heard was the sound of both of their hearts.

He wrapped his hand around her throat and looked into her eyes.

She licked her lips, unfazed by his sudden action.

Lennox nibbled her ear. "Do you think you can handle me?"

The sound of her heart quickening made him harden even more.

He pressed his chest to hers to keep her up and searched under her dress' skirt for her panties. He pulled them aside and dipped his fingers into her wet core, relishing in how she sucked in a breath.

"Answer me, Allyn. Or I'll stop." He stroked her sweet spot and licked her clavicle.

She clutched his shoulders. "Yes."

Hearing that word sent him into action. Dungeon or not, he would have her right now.

He lifted her into his arms and swung her around.

Lowering her to the floor, his eyes were fixed on hers.

Unbuttoning his pants seemed to take too long. How long had he waited for this moment? Longer than she knew.

After he took off his pants, he pulled his vest and shirt off and lifted Allyn's skirts for a look at her slender, white thighs. Sliding her panties off had her biting her lip in anticipation. Lennox was not one to disappoint.

He parted her legs and lowered himself in between them.

"Mind if I taste?"

He took her clit in between his teeth and licked it with the tip of his tongue. She grabbed his hair and let out the most exquisite sounding moan he'd ever heard.

His fingers worked inside of her, stirring her wet core while his tongue encircled her nub. Allyn clutched at his hair so tightly that he knew she was close to climax.

Not yet.

Lennox lifted himself from between her legs, satisfied that she was suitably warmed up for him, and slid inside.

She gasped and arched her back as he went deeper until their pelvises were pressed to one another. He pulled grabbed her thighs and pulled her closer.

The pleasure was too much. He wanted to close his eyes and savor each thrust, but he couldn’t look away from her and how her lips were parted in euphoria.

The witch he’d hunted for years was his. That thought excited him. The thought that she also belonged to Conall sobered him.

He growled, willing it away.

She was his.

Lennox picked up speed and held her legs up to his shoulder, testing her flexibility as he scraped her G-spot with expert precision.

Like music, she cried out and he closed his eyes, a satisfied grin on his lips.

Pulling her onto his lap, he drove her mad as he lifted her bottom up and down onto his shaft until he joined her in a climax that had him clutching her body to his.

The ringing in his ears blared too loudly, blocking out everything.

Even the sound of Conall’s voice inside his head.

CHAPTER 26

ALLYN HELD ONTO Lennox as she worked at controlling her breaths.

She was covered in a sheen of sweat, but her body sang with bliss.

The fact that she'd just had sex with Lennox both frightened and excited her.

She kept reminding herself that he and Conall were the same person. This was all to break the curse.

If that was the case, why did she feel dirty all of a sudden?

She licked her lips and swallowed.

"Lennox?"

"Yeah?" He hugged her to him without any indicator that he would let her go anytime soon.

"What now?"

He pulled back until they were face to face. He lifted a brow.

"What do you mean?"

Allyn ran her hand through his hair. It was smooth as silk, and felt luxurious between her fingers. She breathed him in and released a sigh.

Avoiding his gaze, she asked the question that had plagued her mind since they'd first met.

"Are you going to let my father go now?"

His jaw tightened, and he caught her by the wrist. "That's what you want to know? After the moment we just shared."

Tilting her head, she observed. She'd wounded him.

“Of course,” he said. He stood and set her down on the floor. “You’re only concerned with one thing, and its not me.”

Stark naked, he showed not a shred of bashfulness as he stood before her.

“I—I’m sorry,” she said, glancing away. “But, you said you’d let him go.”

“I’ll set him free. In time,” Lennox said and collected his clothes. He headed out the door and paused. “The castle is yours. Except for the top floor.” He cleared his throat, clearly avoiding her eyes. “I’ll call for you if I need you.”

Allyn covered her chest and watched him go. She wanted to stop him, but couldn’t find the right words that would make it all right.

Frustrated, she rested her head in her hands and sighed. Why shouldn’t she ask about her father? Her father had nothing to do with any of this.

Then, she remembered the words from her dreams—the words from her memories.

What had she done if not tamed the beast? But, Lennox was still the same? Something was not right. Or, perhaps he didn’t love her.

Allyn left the dungeon, her mind racing. Was this just another win for Lennox? Was love even something he was capable of?

She sighed, and climbed the dark and dreary staircase that led back to the upper levels of the castle. She’d have to do more than slept with the prince to get him to fall for her.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

CHAPTER 27

TWO WEEKS PASSED without a word from Lennox, and Allyn explored the palace freely.

All except for the top floor as Lennox warned.

Each day that passed, she wished she would catch a glimpse of the prince. And, each day she was disappointed.

How could they have that intimate moment just to become strangers once again?

It churned her stomach to be in this position.

All alone, with the ghosts of the castle watching her, Allyn felt that for the first time since she'd been in the castle, she walked through the halls as if she owned the place. She was there on her terms. Even though she'd searched everywhere for a trace of her father, she'd come up with nothing.

"Would you like supper brought up to your room, miss?" Calinda asked.

She ran her hand along the walls, finally allowing herself to feel the history of the castle. "I'm not very hungry. But, thank you, Calinda."

She absorbed the energy of the castle, breathing it in. It was a lot to take in. Centuries of love, loss, and sorrow flooded her senses, but she allowed it to. She embraced it. If she was going to break the curse and free Conall, she needed all of the information she could get.

She paused in the middle of the hallway as Maisie walked by, her eyes fixed on Allyn. She wore an old-fashioned purple smock, her short hair dull and lifeless, her face a pasty white.

"Hello, miss," Maisie said, smiling.

Allyn spun around, her eyes wide as saucers. *That voice*.

Calinda paused as well. “Something wrong, miss?”

Allyn covered her mouth as she watched Maisie walk away.

It can’t be.

She turned back to Calinda and shook her head. “I’m fine,” she said. “I just thought her voice sounded familiar.

Calinda bowed. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Nodding, Allyn’s mind raced. “Just one more thing. Can any of the ghosts of the castle leave?”

As if confused by the question, Calinda’s brows furrowed. “No. Part of the curse is that we are bound to the castle and the grounds.”

“Is Maisie your daughter?”

“What kind of question is that?”

Allyn shrugged, her eyes fixed on the little ghost as she vanished into the darkness at the other end of the hall. “Just curious.”

“She was an orphan. We let her in a long time ago. But, yes, I raised her as my own.”

“I see,” Allyn said. “Where did she come from?”

“Your questions are quite vexing, miss. I don’t follow your meaning. What are you really getting at?” Calinda asked, putting her hands on her hips.

“I don’t know. I can’t really put my finger on it. You know?”

“No,” Calinda said, shaking her head, her lips pert.

“You see, when I was a little girl,” Allyn began, lowering her voice and stepping closer to Calinda. “Something visited me when I was in the convent. I can’t say if it was a ghost, a spirit, or something else. But, it sounded just like Maisie.”

Calinda’s brows furrowed, making her forehead crease. “That’s impossible.”

“Is it?”

Calinda looked over her shoulder in the direction Maisie vanished into.

“I think you should go to bed, miss.”

Allyn sighed. “Sure. You’re right. Good night, Calinda.”

“May I give you some advice, miss?”

Allyn nodded. “Of course.”

“Everything you see in this palace is not what it seems. But, you already knew that. Correct?”

Frowning, Allyn mulled over the ghosts words. What was she trying to tell her?

“I think so,” Allyn said. “How could it be? The castle is haunted. The prince is cursed. Am I the only one that is what she seems to be?”

Calinda bowed. “I doubt that, miss. And I’d say that once you see that, you might get what your heart desires” she said, and vanished.

A chill ran up Allyn’s spine at Calinda’s words once she was alone.

More riddles.

Allyn walked the rest of the way to her bedroom. Could Maisie have been the one that used to visit her? Why would she do such a thing?

She drew her own bath and sat in the hot water with her arms over the sides. As she closed her eyes, she thought of everything that had transpired that year alone.

She never thought she’d be face-to-face with the Wolf that almost captured her last winter. The monster that had haunted her dreams over the past few months.

Now, she was falling for him.

How did that make any sense?

Nothing about Allyn’s life ever made sense. She figured she’d better get used to it. After their moment in the dungeon, she’d been in a state of withdrawal without him. Still, he never seemed to leave the top floor.

She’d been waiting, without any luck.

She closed her eyes, not realizing just how fatigued she was and drifted to sleep.

CHAPTER 28

"**HEY, GINGER!" THE** prince shouted from the bottom of the tree.

Allyn laughed from the treehouse on the Elastrian Imperial Palace grounds. She forced the thought that soon she'd have to go back home and the best weekend of her life would be over.

At ten, the thought of boys had always frightened her. At school they picked on her. But, for the first time, a boy actually thought she was pretty and treated her with kindness.

"Come get me," she yelled down at him.

The prince laughed and she squealed as he climbed the ladder at the speed of a jaguar.

He's supposed to be a Wolf, not a cat!

Allyn watched him climb into the opening in the floor of the treehouse.

"You're way too fast. It's not fair," Allyn said.

He shook snow from his hair, grinned, and ran to her. She tossed her head back and laughed as he tickled her.

She pushed him away. "Okay! Okay!"

He stopped and folded his arms behind his back, his blue eyes bright as they met hers. "Really?"

Allyn nodded. "Just one peck." She lifted a finger to him. "That's it. Don't get too fresh."

He laughed and approached her. She could feel her cheeks heating. She'd never kissed a boy before.

But, to kiss a prince was something all girls dreamed about.

"Hey," he said once they were face to face.

“Yes?” Allyn swallowed, her heart racing at how close they were.

“Promise me something.”

She smiled at him. “Anything.”

“When you go home, you won’t forget me.”

Allyn giggled. “How could I forget you?”

For a moment she noticed something in his eyes. Pain, perhaps? Sadness?

He inhaled and smiled again. “Say it.”

Allyn tilted her head. “I promise that I will never forget you.”

He kissed her then, and her heart melted. Such an innocent action would affect her heart and soul more than she ever anticipated.

ALLYN’S SLEEP DIDN’T last long as something touched her hand. Allyn woke up with a start, splashing in the tub as she sat up.

She hated being awakened from her favorite memory, the one she clung to when she was afraid or hurt, or lost.

“Who’s there?” She rubbed her eyes and looked around the empty bathroom.

Damn ghosts.

She shivered and realized that her bath water was frigid. How long had she been asleep?

She stood and stepped out of the tub onto the cold floor. Shivering she grabbed her towel and dried herself. She left the bathroom and looked around her room. It was quiet.

Too quiet.

She yawned and stretched her arms, and an idea came to her.

The castle was asleep. Perhaps she should explore.

Crossing the room, she grabbed her robe from the back of a chair and pulled it over her nude body. Once she was out in the hallway, she tied the robe’s belt and peered into the darkness, half expecting Calinda to be there watching her door.

The hallway was clear, and she escaped her room in silence.

Without those annoying heels on, she was able to make it down the hallway and ascend the stairs to the next level of the castle unheard. All

she could hear was the sound of her own heartbeat.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she noticed how it was drastically colder than the rest of the castle, which was already chillier than most modern homes. She glanced to the right.

Conall's wing. When she looked to his wing she felt warm and safe.

A look to the left gave her an entirely different feeling. All she felt was cold, empty, sad.

She stood there, closed her eyes, and cleared her thoughts. She'd let the castle guide her.

"I'm all yours," she whispered. "Which way should I go?"

She listened, hoping to hear if Lennox was in his wing. Instead, she heard something coming from Conall's.

That was enough to make her run in his direction. Her heart raced as she darted down the hallway. Conall. Please be there.

She wasn't sure which door led to his bedroom, but had a suspicion that it was the one at the very end. Passing by closed doors in a dark hall didn't frighten her. Her mind and heart were set on one thing. When she reached the door, she turned the knob and burst in.

Inside, it was quiet. At the far end was a window, and she saw the moon glowing in the dark night sky.

"Why are you really here?" Lennox's voice asked from the darkness.

Her heart skipped a beat.

She looked to her right and saw him laying on his back on Conall's bed. She stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind her.

"To make you love me."

He sat up in the dark, the moonlight's casting a dim glow on him.

When he didn't reply, she took a few steps forward.

How her heart wished it was Conall. But she wasn't disappointed. She needed Lennox to accept and love her, and maybe she could break the curse.

Maybe she was just as crazy as they were.

"Come here," he said, his voice making the hairs on her arms rise.

She chewed her bottom lip, afraid that if she got closer she might lose her edge over him. Their power struggle seemed to never stop. She knew that if she joined him in that bed that he would be in charge once again.

Memories of the dungeon sent shivers along her skin.

Would that be so bad?

CHAPTER 29

"I **CAN'T," ALLYN** said, thinking of the side of the prince she'd fallen for first—the one she was trying to save.

Would Conall hate her for submitting to Lennox if she did break the curse?

"Why?" Lennox asked.

Allyn shook her head. "I love Conall."

"Then you love me."

"I do. In a way. But, Conall has my heart. My love for you is… different."

Lennox left the bed and approached her, the moonlight at his back, illuminating him like a man from a dream. Her eyes roamed over his bare chest, his tight muscles and abs too perfect to be real.

"What's so special about Conall?"

Allyn shrugged. "He's kind."

"He's boring."

"He's handsome."

"I look better," Lennox said, raking his hands through his hair, a wicked grin on his lips.

Allyn pursed her lips. "You tried to kill me."

"But, I didn't."

He was almost right before her, and she took a step away.

"You have my father somewhere," Allyn whispered.

Lennox stopped and lowered his voice to match her tone. "I'm a liar."

What?

"You're telling me you don't have my father in some secret spot?"

Lennox shrugged. “I’m a *good* liar. Is that so surprising?”

Allyn’s hands shook. He *was* a good liar. That’s not the kind of person she wanted. Knowing her father was safe left her free. She could leave.

But, Conall.

“How could you?”

Before she could turn and run, he had her in his arms.

“I’m also faster than you, Allyn,” he said, holding her tight to his bare chest.

“Let me go!” She struggled to free herself from his arms.

“No,” he said, turning her to face him. “I can’t let you go.”

Allyn slapped his face, scowling at him. “Why? Don’t you already have everything you want?”

“No,” he repeated. His calm demeanor was off-putting. “I don’t. I want you. That’s it. Just you.”

Allyn froze. He held her off the ground, his face less than an inch from hers.

“But, you’re a liar,” Allyn hissed. “You just said it.”

Lennox set her down, releasing her. “Not about you. Never about you.”

Free, Allyn exhaled. “I can never believe anything you say.”

“Can you believe that when we were kids that it was me you spent that weekend with?”

Allyn’s eyes widened. “What are you talking about? I’m so confused.” She held her hands out. “It was Conall!”

“Allyn. Why haven’t you figured it out yet?”

“What haven’t I figured out?”

“I am the sickness,” Lennox said, his voice breaking. “The sickness that has held Conall back from living his life. From loving. But, I am also a part of the curse.”

Allyn swallowed when she saw tears in his eyes. She never thought she’d see such a thing. An odd sensation of sorrow nagged at her gut.

“But, what about me? I suffer too. *I* get tucked away until the one season when I get to be free.”

Allyn shook her head. “I don’t understand, Lennox. Make me understand. Conall was the boy I spent that weekend with when I was a little girl.”

He took her hands, tears dripping from his face. “No, Allyn. I just told you that I am the sickness. I don’t exist for the majority of the year. When

Conall is free, I am a phantom. I am nothing. But, when I get my chance, Conall is there. He is always there. He sees everything, and he fell for you at the same time that I did. You were the first good thing I've ever experienced."

Allyn reached up and wiped a tear from his face. "You let me go," she said, softly.

"I did."

"How?"

Lennox peered into her eyes. "You are the strongest sorceress I've ever hunted, but not even you are stronger than me. I wanted to see you live. Why? Because I've been hunting you since we first met. Not to kill you, but to feel like I meant something once again."

Speechless, Allyn pressed her cheek to his chest. His words ripped through her, breaking her heart. That boy she'd played with as a child had been a mystery, but one that she enjoyed trying to figure out.

Never did he make her feel inferior as they climbed trees and raced through the palace. On the last day, he kissed her on the lips—a soft and sweet kiss that made her blush for days every time she thought about it.

Allyn closed her eyes as she processed all that she'd learned. She could hear Lennox's heartbeat, and knowing the truth didn't make her feel any better. She thought she'd escaped that night in the woods, but it was Lennox that let her go free.

"Dear Lord," she breathed. "Why not tell me the truth in the beginning?"

Lennox whispered to her. "Where's the fun in that? You've always had me. I just wanted to make you work for it."

A smile came to her lips as she looked up to him.

And with the blink of an eye, he vanished from her embrace.

CHAPTER 30

ALLYN RACED FROM Conall's bedroom, her heart beating out of her chest.

"Lennox!" She shouted his name as she ran through the empty halls of the castle.

There was no reply. There was nothing at all.

The castle was completely silent.

Allyn stopped in the middle of the hallway, her eyes darting to every dark corner of the castle. She looked over the balcony. The guards were gone. She placed her hand on the wall, listening for the whispers.

Nothing.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as Allyn felt the presence of someone behind her.

"Calinda?" she called, too afraid to turn around.

"Calinda isn't here. No one is here."

Allyn spun around. Her face paled.

Maisie hovered in the air, her hollow eyes fixed on Allyn.

"You're not a ghost, are you?" Allyn asked, swallowing.

Smiling, Maisie shook her head. Her hair floated around her youthful face, but Allyn knew that this was no child. "No, miss. I'm much older than witchcraft. But so are you."

Allyn backed away. "What do you mean? What are you?"

"You're friend."

Allyn seriously doubted that. She wrung her hands, looking past Maisie toward Lennox's half of the castle.

"Where is Lennox?"

Maisie laughed. “I sent him away. He was a bad boy. He let you in. He wasn’t supposed to let you in.”

Allyn turned away from Maisie and ran. She knew it was no use when Maisie appeared before her.

Instead of being angry, Maisie laughed again. “Where are you going, Allyn? Don’t you want to play?”

Allyn stood there, more afraid than she’d ever been.

“I’ll play with you, Maisie,” Allyn said, her mind racing as she tried to think of a way around this entity. “But you have to tell me what you are.”

Maisie landed on the ground with a thud that shook the ground. “I *told* you, Allyn. I am your friend. I’ve been your friend since you were a little baby.”

“Why?”

Maisie ran to Allyn, and wrapped her arms around her, knocking her to the ground.

“I can’t tell you. It would ruin everything. And, I’ve had so much fun playing with you. We can play for an eternity, if you’d like.”

A sound of beating on a door came from the west wing caught Allyn’s attention.

Allyn sat up, but Maisie pushed her back down.

Maisie’s hollow eyes widened. Inside her sockets was nothing but a black pool.

“Ignore that,” Maisie said.

Maisie was strong, stronger than Lennox, and her body pressed Allyn to the ground like a heavy weight.

“What is that sound?” Allyn asked.

Maisie grinned. “Conall. He’s dying.”

Allyn gasped. She tried to shove Maisie off of her. “Get off, Maisie!” She pleaded. “I have to help him!”

“No,” Maisie said, her voice booming throughout the entire castle. She pinned Allyn. “He’s my toy. Find your own.”

Her playful smile was gone, and Allyn shook with terror.

“Maisie. Stop this. Let me go to Conall.”

“You came to play my game, but I can’t just let you win. I’ve put too many years and effort into this game.”

“What do you mean, Maisie? No one is playing a game but you.”

“But, it’s been the most fun game of all. I can play for an eternity. I can ruin this family until I get bored. And let me tell you, Allyn. I’ve had so much fun playing with the Barans. But, what I did to Conall was the best. Cursing the clan was nothing compared to what I did to that boy. Teasing you was just the icing on the cake. Letting you think you had a chance was the rush I’ve been waiting for. Now, I can feed on your sorrow.”

Allyn tensed. Her eyes widened as she looked up at Maisie. The revelation was unexpected, and more diabolical than she’d imagined. “You are the witch that cursed them.”

“Now, Allyn. Don’t be rude. I’m not a witch. No more than you are.”

Maisie threw Allyn into the air as if she weighed nothing. Allyn sucked in a breath and opened her arms before her body slammed into the ceiling. To her rescue came her power, the red bands that had tormented her, saved her from being crushed by the force with which Maisie threw her.

She steadied herself in mid-air, the bands holding her up.

Maisie flew up to meet her. With a spin, she transformed from a pretty little girl to a wiry woman with white hair.

Maisie hissed. “You know, I had to get rid of your mother or your father might not have ever let you leave. You should thank me for all I’ve done for you.”

Allyn’s heart stopped. Every inch of her skin tightened with rage as she clenched her jaw.

“You killed my mother?”

“Kill? No. I sent her to a better place,” Maisie said, laughing. “Isn’t that what the humans like to say? A better place. No pain or suffering. What rubbish.”

Allyn shrugged off her robe. Her body became encased in the red bands as they wrapped around her, clothing her naked body in red, fueling her, protecting her, giving her strength.

The nuns told her to resist. To not let her power win. She just realized she’d been saving it up for this moment.

Maisie watched, with interest. “How are you doing that? Hey! I’m talking to you.”

Allyn ignored her, feeding her energy with all of the pent up aggression, sorrow, and suffering she’d ever felt.

Maisie was the one thing that stood between her and the man she loved. And that meant Maisie was what she'd really been brought to destroy.

To have a real purpose…this was what Allyn had been waiting for. She knew she had to break the curse. She just realized how.

She'd never been so ready to fight in her life.

She'd fight for the man she loved.

"Don't do it, Allyn," Maisie warned. "We are allies. We are sisters. Don't chose the humans."

Allyn shot her a glare, tears blurring her vision. "Don't mess with the people I love."

A quick snap of one of Allyn's bands ripped through Maisie's body.

Allyn sent them outward, like tentacles, to continue her assault on Maisie, the force that had made her entire life almost unbearable to live.

A cry from the west wing caught her attention, and she flew toward it, Maisie's cries left behind. Allyn had always wanted to fly, and now she did, at full speed to the man she loved.

"GET BACK HERE!" Maisie shouted, pulling Allyn backward by one of the bands.

Allyn growled, spinning around to face Maisie. "I'm not playing with you anymore, Maisie," she said, and with a surge of energy, Allyn's body turned into flames.

Maisie's scream filled the castle, as Allyn's flames consumed her, burning through her defenses, through her spells, curses, through every layer of power she'd thought would protect her from…whatever Allyn was.

Allyn fought to see through the bright light that shone from within. Her light filled every dark crevice of the castle, and when it dimmed, Maisie was gone.

Allyn fell to the ground, totally spent.

She tried to pull herself to her feet, but her arms and legs had nothing left to give her. She groaned.

"Conall."

The sound of running footsteps vibrated along the floor, but Allyn was too weak to look up and see what caused it.

The noise stopped, and Allyn was ready for rest.

Until she heard her name called.

“Allyn.”

Allyn fought to open her eyes. To her surprise, sunlight shone on the man above her. He cradled her head and kissed her.

“Wake up. Please. Don’t go.”

“Conall?” Allyn called.

He kissed her again. “It’s me. I’m back. Like I promised.”

Allyn’s eyes flickered open. She fought her fatigue and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Conall!”

Conall pulled her into his arms, and she straddled him. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “But, you broke the curse.”

Allyn sniffled and held his face. “Did I really?”

He nodded and kissed her again. He littered her face with kisses, and she tugged at his black hair.

“You’re real. You’re really here.”

“I am.”

She looked him in the eyes. “Where is Lennox?”

That question made Conall’s eyes water. He closed his eyes against the tears.

“You broke the curse, Allyn,” he said.

“Why won’t you tell me? Where is he?”

Conall opened his eyes. “He’s here, babe. He always will be. Because he is me. *You* made me whole. Finally.”

Allyn’s mouth parted. She never thought about what she would do once the curse was broken. Now, that Conall was back, and she was in his arms, she realized that he was right. She held onto his face, and there…she saw Lennox in his eyes.

She made both sides of him fall for her.

She fell for them both as well.

Conall rubbed her back and buried his face in the crease between her neck and her shoulder.

“What now?” she asked, noticing how a hint of white hair peeked through his hair on the sides.

He kissed her on the lips and sighed. “Look,” he said.

Allyn’s brows furrowed as she followed his icy blue gaze to look over the railing and out the large windows that faced the woods.

It took her a moment to realize what she was looking at, and when it did, she gasped and came to her feet.

Conall joined her, taking her hand into his.

The Winter Winds had stopped.

Conall stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her body. He kissed her ear. “You ended the storm. Looks like we’re going to tell the world it’s safe to leave their homes.”

Allyn turned to him, a smile on her face. She jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around him. She was rejuvenated by everything she’d gained and all that she’d learned.

Finally, Allyn knew her purpose.

“I broke the curse,” she said. “Just like Sister Margaret said I would.”

Conall traced her jaw with his thumb and kissed her on the lips.

“You did,” he said. “But, you’ve done so much more.”

Tears trailed down her cheeks, and she looked into his eyes. “What else have I done?”

He rested his forehead against hers, and said four words that sent a delicious shudder through her body.

“You made me whole.”

Thank you for reading Lady and the Wolf. Stay tuned for more fairy-tale retellings in the world of Elastria. Please consider leaving a review, and check out excerpts from The Wizard’s Daughter and Academy of Lost Souls on the next page.

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AN EXCERPT FROM THE WIZARD'S DAUGHTER

Elle woke in a panic, the pearl necklace around her throat pressing into her tender flesh.

It burned.

Sweat drenched her fire-red hair as she sat up in bed and glanced around the darkness of the room. The air was thick, too hot, stale, pulsing with magic.

The scent of burning embers wafted into her nostrils as she set the fire hearth ablaze. A flick of her wrist was all it took.

She stood from her bed, the cold stone floor a shock to her pale, white skin.

The Crystal Keep was asleep. The other wards of the castle monastery curled up under their blankets, safe, and warm, while poor, less fortunate

humans and shifters were left to suffer as a curse plagued the Enchanted Kingdom.

Looking out to the night sky, she whispered a quiet prayer.

“Please,” she began. “Take me from this place.”

Something stirred within her, a flutter of cold followed by warmth. A smile came to her face as a gentle breeze swept in and lifted her hair, cooling the sweat on her scalp and caressing her face.

Winter was coming, and with it, the Enchanted Kingdom would shield itself from the rest of the world—from the darkness that always seemed to knock on their door.

A curse plagued the fae folk, the shifters, and the scattered tribes of humans. Under the rule of the Davidian Clan, there was at least peace.

To be untouched—unmarred by the Serpent Sister’s Curse, meant that danger came in many forms.

From dark forces.

From witches.

From desperate men.

Just days ago, one of Elle’s best friends had been kidnapped and whisked away by a gang of men. To be wed and mated to their sons, no doubt.

Poor Magda.

Elle, on-the-other-hand, she was destined for a different future.

She would escape the Enchanted Kingdom on a boat, sail to a faraway place, and live out her life as a baker.

Yes, to only worry about flour, eggs, milk, and sugar would be a grand life—a life worth living.

A knock came on her door.

She gasped, shooting a frightened look over her shoulder. With a sweeping of her hand, she calmed the flames of the fire and sent them vanishing into the air like embers in the wind.

“Elle,” a familiar voice called.

She stiffened, closing her eyes. “Come in, Anna.”

The maidservant opened the door, peeking inside.

“I saw light, miss,” she said, peering around the room, a look of confusion on her face when she realized that the room was dark. “Are you in need of anything?”

Elle shook her head. “No, dear. I may take a walk around the gardens.”

“At this hour, miss? The others still sleep.”

“Do not worry. The guards are always watching over us. No harm will come to me.”

“Are you certain?” Anne asked. “I can accompany you.”

No, she thought. *You don’t want to follow where I must go*.

Instead of voicing her thoughts, she simply forced a small smile and approached the young blonde with a brighter future ahead than her mistress.

She took her by the shoulders, the truth in her eyes.

“I will be back before breakfast,” she said, keeping her voice light. “Then, we can read by the lake.”

Anne grinned. Though she was a servant—a human with no magic, no ability to shift, and no prospect for bearing children, Elle envied her. She’d give anything to be like her.

To be free.

After dressing, Elle ventured out into the early dawn. Before the others awakened, while the maids fetched hot water for the morning washing, she stalked the gardens.

The cold, wintry air swept around her, lifting her hair from the hood of a fur-lined cloak. Back home, the sun would rise above the distant mountains, and cast its glow onto her as she lay in the hay, chewing wheat and daydreaming of the ocean.

She’d never seen it before, and the tales her grandfather would tell would feed her imagination for the rest of her life.

Violet flowers bloomed along emerald ivy that wrapped around the iron gates that separated the monastery from the wild world beyond. It was a stark contrast to the white snow.

A pop of color in untainted territory.

She observed the towers, and the guards who stood high above, looking over the entire frosted valley.

It would take some crafty thinking to get past them.

She took off her gloves, in need of true feeling. With her hands wrapped around the bars of the gate, she breathed in a cleansing breath.

The chill of the iron was almost too much to handle, but she held on, wishing by some divine intervention, that the gate would creak open, and she'd be free to run.

Did her grandparents know what they were sending her off to? That this place was more of a prison than a sanctuary?

The questions fleeted from her mind as her eyes narrowed at the majestic white wolf standing on the other side of the gate. Only a few feet away, he blended in with the snow and ice-covered trees that lined the road leading to town.

Where did he come from?

Her breath caught in her throat as bright blue eyes met hers, and white smoke puffed from the wolf's snout.

She wasn't sure why, but something stirred within her. She knelt to the ground, and without hesitation, reached out a hand through the bars.

As if pleading, she reached for him in a silence that spoke volumes.

"Please," she whispered. "Don't leave me."

A grunt escaped her lips as someone grabbed her by her hair and yanked her to her feet. She shot a look over her shoulder, not surprised in the least to see Father Lewis glaring down at her.

"What are you doing out here?"

She shook her head, utterly terrified of the leader of the monastery, his dark eyes portals to true evil.

With trembling lips, she turned to seek out her white wolf.

To her dismay, he was gone.

She closed her eyes, wondering if he was real, or just her imagination. At times, it was difficult to tell the difference.

But, the truth remained, Father Lewis had her in his clutches, and she'd be punished.

Turning to face him, she feigned innocence.

"Nothing, Father," she said, speaking as sweetly as possible over the shaking of her voice. "Just a walk through the gardens. Apologies if I've gone too far."

"You could have been kidnapped, or murdered!"

She nodded, frantically. "Yes, Father. I know, Father. It won't happen again."

He frowned, but considered her words. He let go of the handful of her hair, and shoved her back toward the main building. "Off with you. Repent

for you sins at the ceremony today, you foolish girl."

She nodded, thankful to be let free with such minimal scolding. She ran, not looking back, snow flying as her boots carried her along the path.

No gods or wolves will set you free, she told herself.

Still, there had to be another way.

A LOOK AT ACADEMY OF LOST SOULS

The crunch beneath my boots was too loud in my sensitive ears, but it didn’t stop me from pushing forward.

The forest was thick, and dark, with tightly-knit trees clustered together. Some of the exposed roots made it difficult to navigate the forest floor, but my sight was better than any humans.

I could see the lifeline of the trees and everything around me as I crossed the forest with ease. The dim light that surged through the tree roots and sleeping animals was enough to light a path for me—one that led to a small wooden house the size of a miniature playhouse for children.

Ivy grew along the dark wood, and I’d decorated it with flowers when I’d created it.

I settled onto the ground before it and gave it a little knock.

Out of the front door came a small fairy with thick black wings, dark hair, and big eyes the color of the sunset.

“Orion,” I said, pleased to see his little face.

He peered up at me through shiny hair and frowned. “Up a bit late, aren’t you?”

Shrugging, I glanced toward the sky. “Night is when I’m most at home.”

“The stars,” he said, and I nodded.

“Yes. Exactly.”

“What brings you to my part of the woods?”

A shrill cry broke out in the quiet of the forest—a cry from the direction I’d just left from.

An icy chill raced up my spine as I stood from my spot on the snow-covered forest floor.

“What was that?” I whispered, narrowing my eyes as I gazed through the trees toward the main road that curved down the hill toward my farm.

Orion flew up to my left shoulder and settled there, peering ahead.

“I’ll take a look,” he said, and his eyes began to glow.

Those ethereal eyes landed on me after a few moments of quiet and the distant howling of the wind.

“They’ve come,” he said, his small voice merely a whisper in the cold night.

I knew it. I didn’t want to admit it—but, I knew they would come one day.

The Council of Souls—the founding force behind the great Academy of Souls that loomed over all from its mountain-top series of castles and medieval buildings.

I closed my eyes. A slow breath was released from my lungs as I prepared myself for what was about to happen.

The war had taken much from me and my family. Now, it would take me from what was left of them.

The sound of trotting horses grew closer and I opened my eyes to see glowing lights from the carriage.

“I won’t let them separate us.”

“I know, Skylar. All will be fine,” Orion said.

“Should I run?” I asked, desperate for an answer other than what was about to happen.

He shook his head, and placed a small hand on my cheek. “They’d find you. No matter where you’d hide.”

I knew he was right, even as the lights emerged from the trees and right toward me.

To my surprise, it wasn’t a small army that had come to take me.

It was one man—a young man with dark hair and glowing orbs floating around his body.

Eyes the color of rust looked to me as he scanned the surroundings. Then, he reached out a hand.

“Skylar, daughter of the traitors, Victor and Kelsey Thronton, I’m Rhys, Seeker for the Society of Dusk.”

I stared at him, and tilted my head, face free of emotion. “I wish I cared.”

It took everything within me to not ball my hands into fists at the mention of my parents being traitors.

Orion tsked. “Easy now, Sky.”

An amused smile came to Rhys’ lips—a smile that only angered me more. Why did he have to have such a nice face to look at? Why didn’t they send one of the old bastards they liked to parade around whenever it was time to account for the poor souls in the district?

This guy couldn’t have been much older than his early twenties, dressed in a sleek black wool coat with golden buttons, and dark slacks. He had a sword at his side, and looked like he knew how to use it.

It didn’t frighten me. I could also wield a sword…amongst other things.

“You’ve been summoned,” he said, disregarding my retort.

“For what?” I asked, frowning.

He shrugged. “Let’s see. I don’t know,” he said, rubbing his chin with the back of his knuckles. “Save the world, perhaps?”

Every inch of my body tensed. Despite my odd attraction to the Seeker before me, I wanted to run. I wanted to gather my sisters and escape into the deepest part of the woods, or a cave somewhere remote.

I didn’t want what fate had in store.

I didn’t want to save the world.

The world had taken everything from me.

Let it burn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.N. Lee is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author who resides in Charlotte, North Carolina. When she is not writing twisted tales, fantasy novels, and dark poetry, she does a great deal of traveling and promotes other authors. Wannabe rockstar, foreign language enthusiast, and anime geek, K.N. Lee also enjoys helping others reach their writing and publishing goals. She is a winner of the Elevate Lifestyle Top 30 Under 30 "Future Leaders of Charlotte" award.

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